ON THE WINGS OF FLAME

An ANDY LANE Story

EUSTACE L. ADAMS

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ON THE WINGS OF FLAME

SAVAGE INDIANS WERE READY TO ATTACK THE PLANE AFTER LANDING.

ON THE WINGS OF FLAME

BY

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FIFTEEN DAYS IN THE AIR
OVER THE POLAR ICE
RACING AROUND THE WORLD
THE RUNAWAY AIRSHIP
PIRATES OF THE AIR

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ON THE WINGS OF FLAME

CHAPTER I

THE TEST OF THE ROCKET PLANE

THERE was a tremendous flare of white-hot gas which rolled for a hundred feet over the green turf of the flying field. A hissing roar, like a thousand Fourth of July sky rockets, all soaring at once, beat against the ears of the spectators who stood at a respectful distance away from the amazing bullet-like thing on the upward-curving rails.

For a second or two the strangest airplane in the world lay on its tracks, hissing fountains of flame from a series of round tubes at its tail. Then, slowly at first but fast gathering speed, it forged ahead along the greased steel runway. Faster and faster it went, until, at the end of a hundred yards, the watchers lost sight of it in its mighty wash of billowing flame and smoke.

The firey tail suddenly swooped upward, following the roller coaster-like tracks that rose high into the air. In the next instant, the rocket plane was almost invisible in the sky to the northward, its progress being marked by the streamer of smoke that curved, like a magnificent rainbow, to the very horizon. The hissing of the flames could no longer be heard. The silence of utter amazement settled upon the spectators. They would never forget the first American trial of the miraculous rocket plane which had been invented and constructed by the famous French inventor, Monsieur Auguste Reval.

Standing just in front of a group of men who watched the disappearance of the new-type airplane were two boys, who still gazed after the drifting wisps of smoke in the northern sky. The older, who appeared to be about nineteen, was built like an athlete, with broad, tapering shoulders, a slim waist and straight, well-muscled legs. Keen blue eyes, a little wrinkled at the corners from too much squinting into wind and sun, were set beneath a bronzed forehead and a tousled shock of sun-bleached hair.

His friend offered a decided contrast to the larger boy. Four years younger, his pale face and huge horn-rimmed spectacles betrayed the mark of too many evenings spent at a radio set exchanging messages with brother radio fans all over the world.

"That's the most marvelous thing I've ever seen, Sonny!" exclaimed the tall chap, who was known to the world as Andy Lane, the most famous and most popular aviator who ever captured the public's heart. "If that bird has landed safely, I would sure like to take up his proposition!"

"It looks pretty hot and uncomfortable to me," ventured the younger lad, looking at his friend with some doubt.

One of the men who stood behind them stepped forward and placed his hand on Andy's shoulder. It was Ronald Avery, president of the Apex Aeroplane and Motor Corporation, who had backed Andy on the flights which had made the boy famous.

"Let's go back to the factory, Andy, and see if Monsieur Reval has landed safely. I sent Sam Allen to the other landing field and he'll

be telephoning in his report in a few minutes."

Andy hesitated, then shook his head.

"I'd a lot rather fly over there and see what's going on myself, if you don't mind. Want to come, Sonny?"

"You bet!"

"Go ahead," agreed Mr. Avery heartily. "I'd go myself if I were not expecting some important visitors from New York."

Andy looked around, as though he were in search of something he had mislaid. Not finding it, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. A group of newspaper reporters, who had been standing a dozen feet away, were scattered as by the impact of a giant projectile as a tan and white collie burst through them at full speed in answer to his master's summons. Half a dozen feet from Andy, the pup braced all four feet and skidded to a halt, looking up into the boy's face inquiringly.

"Come on, Scotty, you flying hound, let's take a hop."

Immediately the dog turned and led the way toward a brand new cabin monoplane which

was parked near the entrance to the huge factory of the Apex Aeroplane and Motor Corporation, bordering the eastern end of the flying field.

"You don't have to tell Scotty which plane is which," commented Sonny, grinning, as he approached the sleek, silvery hull of the air yacht.

"Anything with wings on it looks good to the pup," replied Andy, "but he's fallen in love with my new crate. I don't blame him, either. It's the smoothest thing I've ever flown in."

He opened the cabin door, tossed the tail-wagging collie inside and then boosted Sonny aboard.

Although the young radio fan had ridden in Andy's new plane four times in the two weeks since it had first taken the air, the luxurious comfort of the cabin was a never-failing source of wonder to him. Since the young flyer used it for his frequent trips all over the country, during which he usually took another pilot with him, it was equipped with dual control sticks, so that the two might alternate at the controls. The entire cabin was upholstered in beautiful

Spanish leather and, behind the pilots' seats, was furnished two overstuffed arm chairs, a divan upon which naps might be taken, and even a small writing desk and bookcase.

"Settle down, Ivory-head," called Andy, easing himself into one of the pilots' seats and buckling on the wide leather strap that served as a safety belt. "Let's go!"

Sonny deftly slipped a harness around the collie's body, clipped it to an eyebolt in the wall and gave Scotty a final pat.

"There, mutt," he said, "now *your* safety belt is O.K."

Then he took his place beside the pilot, who was already pressing the starter button. The motor responded with a roar, then settled down to a deep-throated growl. Andy listened intently to the even explosions of the powerful Apex engine. Satisfied with what he heard, he pushed forward the throttle and the plane began to waddle across the field. Faster and faster it went. The earth hammered against the fat balloon tires. Then, suddenly, the skillful pilot pulled back hard upon the stick, the plane's nose rose like an express elevator and

they zoomed high into the sunlit skies. Even before they had ceased to climb, Andy pivoted his ship around on her left wing tip and headed her toward the north, where Monsieur Reval and his astounding new rocket plane had disappeared on the wings of flame.

They flashed across the blue, sparkling waters of Long Island Sound and northward over the rolling hills of Connecticut and Westchester County, New York. Exactly fifty miles from the take-off at Mineola was a wide landing field which had been leveled out by a fleet of tractors. Andy, looking down from his lofty-seat, saw the glistening bullet-shaped rocket plane at one end of the field, surrounded by scores of spectators. He glanced at the clock on the instrument board. It had taken the fleet little Apex air yacht just thirty minutes to cover the distance. How long had it taken Monsieur Reval and the flaming bullet ship?

In a screaming nose dive he swooped down to a perfect three-point landing, close by the crowd which surrounded the strange, new airplane. A pair of motorcycle policemen detached themselves from the mob of onlookers

and dashed across to protect Andy and his ship, for as soon as it became known that Andy Lane had arrived, the people would sweep across the field to press close to their hero. Andy had often been in greater danger from admiring crowds than from the hazards of the air.

Jouncing uncomfortably on the bucket seat behind the first policeman was a fat man, who clung tightly to the officer's waist and who, very apparently, was not enjoying his short ride. As the machine popped and sputtered to a stop, he dismounted and limped over to Andy, a pained expression on his plump face.

"Hello, Sam," called Andy, grinning broadly when he saw the other's discomfited appearance. "What's the matter, don't you like motorcycles?"

"They are about as comfortable, for a man of my ample build, as a motorized pogo stick!" groaned the other. "But listen, Andy, do you know what that crazy bird in the rocket plane did? He shot over here from Mineola in exactly seven and one-half minutes! Imagine that, will you? Unless my arithmetic is rottener than usual, that's at the rate of four

hundred miles an hour! Glad I wasn't sitting beside him!"

"Did he make a good landing?"

"I'll say he did!" replied the other breathlessly. "He shot down here like a streak of greased lightning. Just as I thought that bullet-shaped thing would bury itself twenty feet in the ground, a pair of wheels slid out of the bottom and *whoosh,* one of those rockets went off right in the bow, shooting fire fifty feet ahead of him. The flames came out like a stream of water from a fire hose and slowed his plane up so that he was able to make a landing that wouldn't have broken a crate of eggs.

"Then that crazy Frenchman popped out of his cabin and was so excited that he began hopping around like a monkey on a hot stove. Just as I was about to tackle him and sit on his face until he calmed down, he came to his senses and said, 'Name of ten thousand little pink camels, she is success, my baby!' What do you think of that?"

Sam stopped, completely out of breath. He was always that way, was Sam Allen, the cleverest mechanic who ever swung a wrench.

Without Sam, it is doubtful whether Andy and his intrepid crew would have been able to establish the wonderful records which had so amazed the world. It had been Sam who had walked out on the wind-swept wings of gigantic Apex air liners and repaired motors while in flight. The sub-zero weather of the South Pole and the scorching heat of the Arabian deserts had not deterred him from his job. But of course he had grumbled. Sam *always* grumbled. But that was part of the joy of flying with him. To hear him fuss and, a moment later, to see him face death unflinchingly, was, to Andy, a thing of constant wonder.

"Let's go over and look at the rocket plane," suggested Andy as he, Sonny, Sam and the pup began to walk across the field.

"Why not wait until it is taken back to the Apex factory?" suggested the mechanic. "This crowd will learn that you are here in a minute and then you won't have an instant's peace. At Mineola, we'll have all the time we want to examine it."

"Fair enough," agreed Andy, turning back to his air yacht. "But tell me one thing, Sam.

If I decide to take Reval's big rocket plane—the one that is being finished at the factory—on its first hop to Paris, would you like to go along?"

The mechanic stopped still in his tracks, his mouth open, his eyes nearly popping out.

"Who, me?" he demanded. "Listen, Andy, any time you get me to playing chief ammunition feeder to one of those flying skyrockets, you'll know you are sound asleep and dreaming! No, sir! I have enough trouble keeping your engines going when you are flying all over creation, but this is the limit. Sam Allen going four hundred miles an hour ahead of a fountain of fire that is trying to catch up with him? Well, I should say not!"

Sam's outraged protests made no impression upon Andy and Sonny. The fat mechanic could always be counted upon to object to anything new. It had been so with each of the epoch-making flights that had carried Apex crews all over the world. Both boys knew that if Sam should actually be left behind on any flight, no matter how desperate it might look, Sam's heart would almost be broken.

"Fair enough," agreed Andy, looking very grave. "We'll have to find a new chief mechanic, then. Let's go."

Much crestfallen, Sam followed the two boys and the dog into the young flyer's air yacht and they took off in the direction of Mineola.

CHAPTER II

THE FASTEST PLANE IN THE WORLD

ANDY LANE and his friends stood beneath the hull of the strangest-looking airplane any of them had ever seen. It stood, silent and gleaming like polished silver, all alone in one corner of the mammoth assembly plant of the Apex Aeroplane and Motor Company, where, for two months, now, it had been guarded from prying eyes by a diligent squad of well-armed private watchmen.

It looked all the stranger when one glanced at the other airplanes which stood in the immense room. Far over in another corner stood the big biplane, the *Apex Number 1,* in which Andy and his companions had established the remarkable record of fifteen days in the air without once landing. It had been in this ship that they had proved to the world that refueling in the air was practical. Just to the left was the giant flying boat, the *Apex Number 2,*

in which they had flown over the icy regions of the South Pole and, later, had won the thrilling "Race Around the World." Even larger than the flying boat was a huge amphibian, one of a number that were in passenger service between New York and Havana, Cuba. In that ship, the *Apex Number 3,* they had rescued the missing dirigible, the *Britain* and, despite the efforts of a group of daring men who had wished to steal her cargo of gold, they had sailed her unharmed to London. Near the door leading out to the flying field was a tremendous craft which overshadowed them all as a Great Dane dog overshadows a litter of kittens. It was the *Apex Number 4,* the largest airplane in the world, in which Andy and his crew had carried fifty passengers across the ocean upon the first trip of the recently established New York to London Air Express. This historic ship was now in the hangar for its regular overhauling at the end of its fifteenth trip across. Its place on the passenger schedule was being filled by one of its eight sister ships.

The rest of the floor space was occupied by

dozens of smaller craft; fleet little monoplanes for sport use, larger amphibian air yachts, big passenger planes and bombers for the army and navy and flying boats of a half-dozen different sizes. It was in the manufacture of these planes and the motors which operated them that the Apex Aeroplane and Motor Company made its tremendous profits.

Compared to these planes the strange ship at which the flyers gazed was certainly unusual looking. She was built entirely of smooth, glistening metal and looked for all the world like a long torpedo. Her single stubby wing was less than half the size usually to be found upon airplanes of her size. Instead of the usual tail structure, with the rudder, flippers and stabilizer which are ordinarily to be found at the rear end of the main body, or fuselage, her bullet-like hull ended in half a dozen round tubes, which looked like a cluster of empty shell cases. These, Andy knew, were the rocket tubes, through which were shot the blazing gases which forced the plane ahead in the air.

The tail structure was queerly set above the rocket tubes as though the designer had forgot-

ten to mount it until the very last minute and then had tacked it on the fuselage wherever he could find room. But Andy noted that it was placed there so that it might be out of the way of the fiery gases which would shoot out from just below and behind the rudder.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the entire ship was the fact that she had no propeller. Her entire forward motion depended upon the rush of flames from the rocket tubes.

There was not a single projection from the smooth, wind-streamed hull which might cause a loss of speed. Just behind the rounded nose could be seen a row of tremendously thick glass portholes. These, Andy knew, opened into the pilots' cabin. Others extended along the shining hull to a point about halfway back to the rocket tubes.

Just beneath the bow was a single round opening. Andy remembered Sam's amazing description of the landing of the one-man rocket plane. Monsieur Reval had fired a rocket out of the forward tube to diminish the landing speed of his four-hundred-mile-an-hour plane.

So that would be the purpose of that tube in the bow, Andy decided.

There were two deep cavities in the hull for the wheels which, in flight, were drawn into the holes and enclosed by a sliding steel shutter, as in an amphibian.

"Gentlemen, will you go up and inspect?" came a strange voice from behind Andy's shoulder.

It was Monsieur Reval, the proud inventor. He was so excited that he could scarcely stand still. He was a strange-looking little man, with flashing black eyes, a long nose, beetling black eyebrows and a little black beard which bobbed up and down as he talked.

"It is with the greatest pride and pleasure that I escort the so-famous Monsieur Lane and his so-daring crew to my beloved ship," he said in broken English, bowing low and waving his hands in a gesture of welcome.

"Shimmying dogfish!" muttered Sam, who stood beside Andy. "That bird will have to wear a handkerchief over his face when he talks to me. I get so interested watching his goatee

bounce up and down that I can't seem to listen to what he's saying. But it probably doesn't matter, anyway."

"Pipe down, Fatty!" hissed Andy. "If you get him mad, the whole flight is off, and I'll just naturally smack you out from under your hair."

Sam subsided, grumbling.

"You stand beside him, Sonny," whispered Andy. "If he makes one more break, sic Scotty on him."

Sonny looked at the inventor, who was climbing up the ladder and seemed to be out of hearing distance.

"What's the use of siccing Scotty on Sam?" he asked, laughing. "The pup could bite a two-pound steak off him and Sam's so fat he'd never miss it. He'd just start complaining about the mosquitoes."

But Andy was following Monsieur Reval up the ladder and was not listening. Sam pushed Sonny out of the way and scrambled up after his young commander, puffing and complaining as he lifted his great weight from rung to rung

of the ladder. Sonny began to climb, but Scotty, standing on the floor, barked and whined until his young friend turned back, tucked the gangling dog under his arm.

"Hey, let me come aboard, too!"

From the distance came a running figure which Sonny recognized as that of Joe Lamson, who, as Chief Test Pilot of the Apex factory, had been Andy's assistant pilot on each of the record-breaking flights which had established the name of Apex planes and Apex motors throughout the world.

"You are fine birds to inspect the plane without me!" panted Joe as he reached the bottom of the ladder. He was older than Andy, calm, level-headed and a marvelous pilot, who had been a tower of strength to the young commander in many tight places. When Joe took the wheel, the ship was as safe as in the hands of any pilot in the world.

"Quivering snakes!" exclaimed Sam, as he passed through the doorway in the three-foot thick wall. "This plane would sure be crowded with a gang aboard! I'd have to step out to

change my necktie. I guess flying in fifty-passenger ships has sort of spoiled me for the little ones."

"But, my dear Mr. Allen," protested the Frenchman, "this ship, she is not small. She is nearly one hundred feet long, from bow to stern."

"Where have you hidden all the space then?" demanded Sam, unconvinced.

"Come, I will show you."

"I don't believe I want to," said Sam, turning toward the door. Then he jumped suddenly, with a loud exclamation of pain. Sonny had pinched him, but stood to one side with a most innocent expression on his face. Sam looked at the bespectacled youth in suspicion. Then changing his mind, he turned back into the cabin and followed the others.

Far up in the bow was a small room that was almost a duplicate of that used on the gasoline-driven Apex planes. A pair of comfortably upholstered seats faced two regulation dual-control wheels and rudder pedals. Upon a broad panel set in front of the pilots' eyes was an instrument board, fitted with every kind of

a gauge and dial to show the position of the ship in the air. Compass, altimeter, pressure gauges, thermometer, air speed indicators, turn-and-bank indicators; all these and many more would tell the pilots everything they needed to know while in flight.

"You can't see as well in this plane as you can in the Apex ships," complained Andy.

"That is because of the thick sides and the heavy glass required," explained Monsieur Reval. "Do not forget that in this ship you may reach an altitude of ten or twelve miles and a speed of at least four hundred miles an hour. The plate glass you used before would break like paper under the pressure. You did not need thick sides on your other planes. This rocket plane has a double shell, like a submarine. It must have it to resist the pressure and to keep the crew from freezing to death at the altitudes you will make."

"That settles it," said Sam decidedly. "Ever since I went out on the open wing over the South Pole, my fingers, toes and nose have been very sensitive to cold. So long!"

"Pipe down, Sam," said Andy. "You'd bet-

ter listen and not talk. If anything goes wrong on this flight, it'll be up to you to fix it, so you'd better learn everything there is to be learned."

"You need not worry about the cold," replied the inventor, very earnestly. "Between the metal covering on the inside and that on the outside, is a two-foot layer of insulating material which will keep you perfectly warm."

"Please keep your hands and feet still," said Sam, scowling. "Then I can understand you."

"Certainly," bowed the Frenchman, politely. "In addition to the insulation, there are scores of electric heaters."

"That's all right, then," said Sam in a relieved voice. "If I can cuddle up to a nice warm heater, I'll go along."

Monsieur Reval led the way back to the next room. This had a tier of three bunks, one atop the other, against the port wall. Against the starboard wall was placed a radio table, while in the other corner was a miniature kitchen cabinet containing an electric stove, dishes, pots, pans and the odds and ends necessary to a well-equipped kitchen.

"Do you mean to say we have to all crowd

into this one room to eat, sleep and play the radio?" demanded Sam.

"But yes," replied the inventor. "Everything has to be very compact in this ship. To have made it larger would have cost many, many times as much."

"I guess I can't go, then," sighed the irrepressible fat man. "I couldn't sleep out in the open where people could look at me. Somebody once told me that my mouth falls open when I sleep and that embarrasses me so I can hardly shut my eyes when I think anyone might be looking at me."

"One more blatt out of you, Sam Allen," said Andy, sternly, "and you'll be out of this flight for good. There are curtains on those berths just like Pullman curtains, if that worries you. And now, pipe down or beat it!"

"Yes, sir," said Sam very, very meekly.

"How many are to be in the crew?" asked Sonny, looking about him, perplexed.

"Only four on this flight. You, as radio operator; Joe, as assistant pilot; myself; and someone for mechanic. If Sam is good from now on, we may take him. Otherwise, I'll pick

one of the boys we took on our other flights, I hate to leave Dick Williams, anyway."

Sam looked very worried. But Andy pretended not to notice. No one knew better than Andy, however, that without Sam, the flight would never take place.

"Let us go to the rocket room," suggested the Frenchman.

When the little group stepped into the next room to the rear, each of them felt a sudden sinking of the heart. It did not resemble any engine room they had seen. To Andy's eyes, it looked more like the engine room of a submarine than that of an airplane. On one side was a blank wall which cut almost one-third off the width of the room. That, explained the inventor, held the fresh rockets. Through six holes in the wall, the unused rockets were fed to the six huge tubes by means of movable belts, which looked almost like the ammunition belts on machine guns.

When the ship was to take the air, he explained, a pilot pushed a switch like the throttle of an ordinary plane. This exploded two rockets at the same time, which gave sufficient

force to move the heavy ship ahead on the rails. As soon as she began to move, another switch was thrown, which set fire to the other four rockets. This additional force sent the ship off at the rate of four hundred miles an hour.

"What would happen if you set off all six at the same time?" asked Joe.

"You would be started ahead with such force," explained the Frenchman, "that you might be crushed against your seats."

A faint sigh was heard from Sam.

Each rocket, said Mr. Reval, burned for an hour. The inventing of a powerful, but slow-burning chemical, he said, had been the hardest task of all. As soon as a rocket had burned itself out, a red light shone in the pilots' compartment. If the pilot wished he had but to press a button under the light and another rocket immediately traveled down the belt, into the tube, and was ignited by electricity.

"What do you mean, 'if the pilot wishes'?" asked Andy.

"You see, Monsieur Lane," explained the other patiently, "you take off with all six rockets firing. As soon as you have gained

sufficient speed, you use only two of the rockets to propel the ship onward. There is a device which instantly extinguishes any rocket which you do not wish to use. You may start it again, at will."

"That's like the eight engines on the last big Apex plane," added Joe. "We needed all eight to take off, but only four to keep in the air. But you could switch on the other four any time you wanted to."

"Exactly," agreed the inventor.

"How many rockets can we carry in that bin, or storeroom, behind the wall?" asked Sonny.

"Fifty," replied the inventor. "Allowing for all six to be used at the start, two during flight and a number in reserve, I have calculated that you will be able to fly more than eight thousand miles."

"Enough for a round trip to France and a couple of thousand miles for emergencies! Wow!" Andy whistled in astonishment.

"Yes," agreed Sam, dolefully. "And I'll be sitting here, I suppose, watching those things feed into the tubes. What happens if one of them back-fires!"

"It'll melt you down to size, Fatty," said Andy, laughing.

"When this ship is flying along at four hundred miles an hour, ten miles, or so, in the air, it will be all closed up, won't it?" asked Joe, struck by a new thought.

"Yes," agreed Monsieur Reval.

"How'll we breathe, then?" asked the assistant pilot. "I was in the Army Air Service, before I joined the Apex Company, and we had to use oxygen at something like twenty thousand feet. You expect this boat to go between fifty and sixty thousand."

"Exactly. And arrangements have been made. This engine on this side," the Frenchman explained, pointing to a complicated-looking apparatus set against the wall, "is a generator for charging your storage batteries. It is operated by wind pressure on a tiny windmill set on the hull above our heads." He pointed to a second machine, "This one here, is for generating oxygen under pressure. It is operated by the storage batteries. There is another for keeping the air pressure here in the inner hull the same as at

sea level. The batteries also operate your electric cookstove, your heaters, your lights and your radio. It is all quite simple."

"Where are the supplies and fresh water to be kept?" asked Andy.

"In a large compartment beneath the floor. You have observed that the shape of the hull is like a torpedo. The floor is, of course, flat. Between the two is sufficient storage space to hold a two weeks' supply of food and water, in case you should make a forced landing at sea or in uninhabited district somewhere."

"I think it is perfectly marvelous!" exclaimed Andy. "After seeing your flight in the little test ship, I'm willing to agree that this larger model can do anything you claim for it. Let's go back to the office and talk it over."

CHAPTER III

THE DECISION IS MADE

Mr. Avery was waiting for the inspection party when they entered his office. Seated in a large chair beside the president was Sonny's father, David Collins, who had once been Mr. Avery's chief rival in business. It had been Andy Lane and Sonny who had brought the two competitors together. Despite their difference in age, the two boys had been intimate friends for years. On the first great Apex flight, it had been Sonny who, seated at his radio set at home, had kept the flyers in touch with the world and who had, on several occasions, saved them from disaster.

When Andy and his companions had made their magnificent nonstop flight to the South Polar ice cap, Sonny had operated the radio from the shack at the Bay of Wales, on the ice barrier, and had performed his duty without a single hitch.

Then Andy had invited the lad to be the radio operator upon the Apex plane which had flown around the world and, despite the fact that Mr. Collins' son was really helping a rival company to succeed against one of the Collins planes, the father had given his consent. From that flight on, Sonny was a member of every crew. And Mr. Collins had combined his tremendous aeroplane and engine business with that of Mr. Avery's, with Andy Lane a vice president of the combination. Together, the two manufacturing plants had formed the largest business of its kind in the whole world and, largely due to the advertising given to it by Andy, orders had come from almost every country in both eastern and western hemispheres.

Mr. Collins looked at his young son with a very thoughtful expression in his eyes. He had inspected the rocket plane and he knew that Andy wished to take it up on a flight that would eclipse anything he had ever done. He also knew that if Andy had his way, Sonny would be a member of the crew. Being a true father, Mr. Collins dreaded having the lad, who, to

him, seemed scarcely more than a baby, engage in any more of the flights which had so nearly cost him his life. Still, if Sonny wished to go, and could really help with his ability at the radio, the father could not bring himself to refuse.

"What did you think of the rocket plane, Andy?" Mr. Collins asked.

"It's the most surprising thing I ever saw in my life!" replied the young pilot, his blue eyes shining with enthusiasm. "What's more, I think it will do everything Monsieur Reval says it will. I doubt if it will ever attract the public as a paying passenger ship, but in times of war, its speed would make it the most dangerous weapon in the air."

"Remember, Andy," Mr. Avery reminded him, "we already lead the world with our Apex planes and engines. Why should we spend a lot of money to buy the patent from Reval and then manufacture a type of ship that really competes with those we already make,"

"Because if we don't do it, someone else is bound to!" replied Andy. "If we can produce the best gasoline aviation engines and also the

rocket planes, we'll have the world by the tail. The name Apex will be on every record-breaking ship that flies! We'll call this new plane the *Apex Rocket* and the whole world will know that Apex has broken all records again."

"So you really want to try to make Paris in the rocket plane, then?" asked Mr. Collins slowly.

"You bet!"

"How long will it take?"

"Something like seven hours," replied Andy. "We'd shoot off the runway out there in the middle of the morning and arrive in Paris in time for dinner the same evening."

Mr. Avery referred to some typewritten figures on his broad mahogany desk. Yes, the figures agreed with those worked out by Mr. Collins and himself when the plan was first considered. He, too, thought the thing was possible. After watching the startlingly successful trial in the little rocket plane, he felt sure of it.

"So far as I'm concerned, Andy," he said at last. "I'm for it if you want to make the attempt. Do you agree, David?"

Mr. Collins hesitated for a moment, still looking at the eager face of his young son. Then he nodded slowly.

"Yes. I agree."

"Whoops!" yelled Andy, forgetting that he was a dignified vice president of an important institution, forgetting that he was the world's most famous flyer, forgetting everything in his boyish enthusiasm but the one fact that he and his crew were going to take the air again! Then, quieting down, he faced the two men.

"I'd like to take Sonny, Sam and Joe as my crew. May I?"

Both older men knew that question was coming and had decided what the answer should be. They nodded.

Sonny and Joe exchanged happy glances. Sam looked as though he had just swallowed a worm. Monsieur Reval appeared to be beyond himself with joy. The plan upon which he had worked for ten years was actually coming to pass!

"How soon will she be ready, Monsieur?" asked Andy.

"The rockets are ready. The plane is ready.

There remains only the matter of putting supplies aboard," replied the inventor promptly.

"Then, Mr. Avery," said Andy, "I'd like to start within three or four days. We can cable to the Paris manager of the Apex Company to have the landing field at Le Bourget ready for us. We can notify the newspapers the day before the flight. Until then, we must keep things quiet, or the public will be overrunning the field here and making everything very difficult for us."

"That suits me," replied Mr. Avery, looking at the others, who nodded their agreement.

"Now, just one thing before we break up this meeting," said Mr. Collins. "If this New York–Paris flight is as successful as we think, the different nations of the world will be bidding millions of dollars to be allowed to use our patents. We had better form another company to hold the patents. The Apex Company, of course, will make most of the profits, but you'll all own stock, so there'll be plenty to divide."

"Personally, I'm not very much interested in that, Mr. Collins," spoke up the usually silent Joe. "I guess every one of us has made

more money in prizes and rewards since Andy, here, started taking us with him on these big hops, than we ever dreamed we would have. I can't seem to realize it yet, but I am actually a rich man. I've got all the money I need. But I'm just as interested in this thing as though I hadn't a cent in the world. So I'm in it all over, whether there's a cent coming to me or whether I work for nothing."

Then, realizing that he had made one of the longest speeches of his life, Joe blushed and became silent.

"Me, too," said Sonny, glancing at his father. "My share of the reward for the saving of the British dirigible was enough to knock Dad's eyes out."

"I'm a lot more interested," said Sam, "in knowing what door or window I'm going to climb out of if one of those rockets starts fizzing out the wrong end than in how much money I'm going to make for getting myself cooked to a nice, rich brown!"

The others shouted with laughter. They knew Sam!

CHAPTER IV

A THREAT

The hangar of the Apex Aeroplane and Motor Company blazed with lights. Busy workmen hurried here and there, serious-faced and intent upon their tasks. A line of men passed packages and bundles from motor trucks to the foot of a ladder leading to the door in the side of the silvery air monster, the newest ship to bear the honored name *Apex*.

At the foot of the stepladder stood Mr. Avery, who, in his shirt sleeves, was working as hard as the busiest laborer. A pencil and a pad of paper in hand, he was checking the stores as they were passed up the ladder to the cabin. Within the torpedo-shaped hull, Joe Lamson and Andy Lane were storing the supplies, carefully packing them in lockers beneath the cabin floor. On a large sheet of paper, Joe entered the name of the item against the number of the locker in which it had been packed.

Thus the crew of the *Apex* would be able to tell, in a moment, where any article was stored that they might wish to locate.

"Three split-bamboo fishing poles!" called Joe, examining a paper-wrapped package. "And here are the hooks, line, sinkers and reels."

Andy took the long parcel, placed it in a vacant niche and called:

"Locker number three."

"Locker three!" echoed Joe, making the proper entry on his list. "Here's a box of hard-tack. They must expect we're going to float around in mid-ocean for a month or two."

"Locker number one!" called Andy.

"Locker one! Here's a case of beans."

"Locker num——"

Andy was interrupted by Mr. Avery, who suddenly appeared in the cabin, a puzzled expression on his face.

"I think you'd better come into the office with me for a few minutes, Andy," he said. "There's a fellow outside the gate who says he has a very important message for you and for me. He won't tell me what it is unless you are

with me. I'd have sent him away if I hadn't had a sudden hunch. Come down with me and see if you get the same hunch that I have."

"Gee, Mr. Avery," protested Andy, "I hate to leave right now. It's ten o'clock already and we have three or four more hours' work to do to-night. We don't dare to leave everything until morning, because I'd like to take off promptly at eleven."

"I know," agreed Mr. Avery, "but you can let Sonny take your place checking in the stores."

Sonny, hearing his name, looked up from his radio desk, where he had been adjusting some gadget to his own liking.

"Sure, Andy," he said, "I'll take your place."

So Andy turned over the work to the younger boy and followed Mr. Avery to the main office. While waiting for the stranger to be brought in by one of the watchmen who guarded the gate, Andy looked at the pictures of the other mighty Apex ships in which he and his companions had flown to fame and wealth. And now they were on the eve of taking off again,

this time in a machine so different from the rest that the adventure had even more of a thrill to it than any of those which had gone before. He had not been so excited when they had left Mineola for the end of the world, the South Pole itself! His eyes darkened as he thought of his mother and father, who had been so horrified when he had broken the news that he was going to attempt to jump the ocean in a fiery rocket plane. They had been wonderful after the first shock of worry had passed away. They had seen their boy come back after the most hair-raising experiences and they felt sure that he would return safely this time. But ten or twelve miles in the air, flying at four hundred miles an hour! That had remained in their minds long after their other doubts had been ironed out by their son.

At the very last minute, of course, Mrs. Lane had insisted upon packing Andy's winter flannels and a bottle of pills for a cold in his suitcase, together with various other odds and ends that he would have as much use for as for an Eskimo suit on the Sahara Desert. But now these were safely packed away in Andy's desk

drawer at the office, and the flyer had replaced their weight with other articles for which he knew he would have use.

He wondered what his college mates had thought when they read of the project of the projected flight in the morning newspaper. He laughed grimly when he remembered how some of them had snubbed him when, before his first great flight, he had been a poor boy, working at the village garage three days a week to help support himself and his family. And how, after he, Sam and Joe had remained in the air for more than two weeks, the fraternities had fought with each other for the honor of having him as a member. But, remembering their former attitude, he had declined them all and had remained a "non-frat." With each successive triumph his popularity at college had, naturally, increased, as it had over the entire world. But he had gone to his classes each day and returned to his home in the afternoon, despite every effort made to tempt him into various college activities. He spent so much of his time in his aviation work that he was forced to study hard to make up for his lost time. But

the fraternities had not given up hope of initiating him. Just a few days ago, he had smilingly declined the most recent invitation.

He took a long breath as he looked at the clock on the wall. In thirteen hours, if all went well, they would be soaring into the air at a speed never before reached by man and at a height which had always been thought unreachable. It would be more than one hundred degrees below zero up there, the weather man had told him.

There was a knock on the door. Mr. Avery, who had been busy with a supply list, put down his papers and answered. The door was opened and the uniformed guard ushered in a stranger, who calmly took a chair opposite Mr. Avery's desk and sat down, quite at his ease. Neither Mr. Avery nor the boy had ever seen him before.

"Gentlemen," began the newcomer, briskly. "I have a proposition for you which you will be wise to accept. In behalf of an agent of a foreign government, I offer you a half million dollars for the two rocket planes and full rights to all of Monsieur Reval's patents."

Mr. Avery shook his head decisively.

"Nothing doing. As you read in the papers, we're going to try the big flight. If the plane and its patents turn out to be no good, maybe we'll give you the whole thing for nothing. But it isn't for sale now at any price."

"Gentlemen," stated the visitor earnestly, "unless you accept our proposition before the flight starts, the hop itself can only end in failure. It is doomed before it starts. Then, as you have just said, you'll be willing to throw, or give, the whole thing away. So you can make half a million dollars' profit by unloading here and now."

"What makes you think the flight will end in failure?" asked Andy coldly.

"I don't think it— I *know* it!" replied the other calmly.

Andy opened his mouth to reply, but he suddenly felt Mr. Avery's hand on his arm.

"Just a minute, Andy," said the older man. "Do you mind telling me who this person is that you represent?"

"When I tell you," said the man, grinning, "it will give you quite a shock and will show

you that we mean business. It is Herbert Brewster."

Herbert Brewster! Andy's heart missed a beat! Herbert Brewster, the man who, since the very beginning, had been Andy's deadly enemy. Time and time again Herbert Brewster had tried to turn Andy's success into failure. He had tried to steal Andy's plane on the South Pole ice and to leave the crew of the *Apex* to freeze in the icy wilderness. He had tried to throw Andy overboard from the drifting airship *Britain*. Times without number he had made attempts upon the lives of Andy and his companions. And here he was, again, popping up at the very last minute. Andy felt a sudden chill run over him. He was conscious of a sudden hunch that this time, Herbert Brewster was going to cause more trouble than ever before.

Mr. Avery looked at the stranger as though he had seen a ghost.

"I should have thought that Herbert Brewster had been pretty well licked by this time in his efforts to put Andy Lane out of commission," he said at last. "If I remember cor-

rectly, every time that he has interfered in our plans, it has cost him a lot of money. He is a glutton for punishment, Mr. Stranger."

"But this time," said the man confidently, "he has all the wealth and power of a foreign government behind him and he cannot fail. That government will purchase the rocket planes and patents if it can. But if not, it will make them of no use to anyone. Better sell out while you can, gentlemen, before some lives are lost!"

"Where is Brewster now?" asked Mr. Avery.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. He is close enough so that he is thoroughly acquainted with your plans."

"Does he know that the police are after him?" asked Andy.

"The police are *not* after him," corrected the stranger. "There have never been any formal charges made against him."

Mr. Avery leaned back in his chair, staring reflectively into a far corner of the room. A silence fell upon the other two. At last the manufacturer turned to Andy.

"I suppose I should call my partner, Mr. Collins, in on this meeting, but it is so late that we had better handle it alone. So far, Andy, whenever Brewster has made a threat against us, he has not bluffed. He has at least made an effort to carry out his threats. So if we turn down his proposition, we may expect some kind of trouble.

"So far as I am concerned," he continued thoughtfully, "I think this rocket plane business has tremendous possibilities. But I would rather burn the papers and the planes themselves than to have anything happen to you or to the other fellows in your crew. The Apex Aeroplane and Motor Corporation is wealthy and does not need that extra business. If anyone else but Brewster came at this moment and offered us half a million for the rocket ships and patents, I'd be glad to sell out. But I'd hate to give up to that rat Brewster. On the other hand, I'll leave it to you, Andy. What do you say?"

"Mr. Avery," said the boy, leaning forward in his chair. "Herbert Brewster is one of the coldest-hearted crooks in the world. Anyone

who works with him or for him must be a crook, too. This man has threatened us. So here's my answer!"

Before the astonished stranger could move, the young flyer had left his chair, stepped across the room and grasped him by the coat collar. In an instant, the visitor was snapped out of his seat and marched to the office door, down the darkened hallway and, at the outer door, propelled so violently by the boy's husky boot that he flew several feet through the air before landing sprawled in the grass.

"Sorry I lost my temper, Mr. Avery," said Andy, returning to the office. "But I know that we are in for some kind of trouble and I just thought I'd strike the first blow."

"I wish I had done it myself, son," said Mr. Avery. "But my mind isn't at ease about your starting. The rocket plane is dangerous enough as it is, without someone trying to make things hard for us. Personally, I'd be more than satisfied if you gave up the whole thing."

"No, sir!" The boy was positive. "We'll go back to the ship and see how the other fellows feel about it. But my vote will be to go."

CHAPTER V

AT THE TAKE-OFF

The vast flying field at Mineola had never accomodated such a crowd as gathered to see the take-off of the *Apex Rocket*. Early on the evening before the start, the roads leading to the field were crowded with cars. Entire families camped for the night at advantageous places at the edge of the tarmac, so that they might be able to witness every detail of the amazing event. Hundreds of policemen and two companies of soldiers were on duty to keep the people back of the safety ropes, for upon other occasions when Andy Lane had taken the air, the enthusiastic mobs had broken through the cordon and almost ruined the take-off.

And this time there was a double danger. If the thousands of persons gathered there should break loose and swarm upon the field just as the rockets were exploded, a terrible disaster might take place. None who had seen that

flaming tail of fire could doubt what it would do to a rushing crowd of people who ventured into its path.

Yes, it was an occasion which drew people from hundreds of miles away. The national hero, Andy Lane, was about to take off. That, alone, would have brought thousands of spectators, for in all the world there was no flyer so well beloved as the young hero who had done so much and who wore his honors so modestly. To this was added the fact that he was about to take off in a mammoth rocket plane and the newspaper stories of the feat of its little sister ship had aroused the interest of the public as had no other feat in aviation since Andy had made his last big flight.

Sparkling in the rays of the early morning sun, the mile-long greased tracks drew the attention of all eyes. For a full three-quarters of a mile, they were embedded upon ties in the ground, like any ordinary railroad tracks. At the end of this distance they rose in a sweeping curve, like the slide of a chute the chute, ending abruptly about two hundred feet above the ground. Workmen, armed with huge brushes

and cans of grease, swarmed over this steel runway, putting on the finished touches before the plane should arrive. Other men, armed with small hammers, walked along the elevated structure and climbed over its latticed framework, tapping the steel with the hammers and listening as they tapped. Nothing was left to chance that one of Brewster's men might have tampered with the structure since it was last inspected.

Newspaper accounts of the preparations for the flight had explained that the steel runway was simply an added precaution for the safe take-off. The *Apex Rocket* could leave the ground upon her own wheels, but it was judged wiser not to take any chances at the start of the great flight. Therefore, she was to use the steel track for greater safety.

"Look!" screamed a child. "Look! Here comes the plane!"

From the wide open door of the hangar came a ten-ton tractor, pulling the *Apex.* Her strange torpedo-like fuselage shone in the sunlight as she rolled heavily over the ground upon her wheels, which projected out of her hull like

those of an ordinary airplane. A little group of workmen and guards walked along beside the slowly moving procession. Motion picture photographers dashed here and there, trying to get in the best possible positions for their shots.

High in the air over the field, more than two dozen airplanes dipped and circled, herded like a flock of sheep by four aërial police, whose duty it was to see that no plane strayed into the dangerous area in front of the launching tracks from which the *Apex* would soon hurtle like a shell from a long-range gun.

The tractor waddled toward the lower end of the rails, then, when in position, stopped, cast loose and rumbled away. The workmen carefully jockeyed the *Apex* until a wide pair of skids welded on the bottom of her fuselage were exactly over the rails. One of the men swabbed the plane's skids with a greasy brush. Another climbed into the cabin and operated a small lever between the pilots' seats. To the utter amazement of the watchers, the airplane began to sink as the gears which operated the landing gear began to revolve. Down, down, she settled,

the wheels gradually sliding into her glistening fuselage. In another moment she rested upon the tracks, like a bird settling down to sleep.

The mechanics, peering under the metal hull, saw that she had been properly placed. Her skids were exactly between the grooves of the tracks. Then began the last-minute preparations for the take-off. The mechanics examined everything, inside and out. Sam Allen, clad in a suit of white coveralls, took nothing for granted. He checked everything that had been inspected by the mechanics.

A tremendous cheer rose from the crowd as a number of men emerged from the factory and walked across the field. The motion picture men dashed toward them. From a raised platform a radio announcer spoke excitedly into his microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, Andy Lane is coming out on the field! Can you hear how the crowd is cheering? They are almost going wild over their hero! He is smiling, now, and waving to the people. Just behind him is little Sonny Collins, the world-famous young radio fan, who will be at the key

during this amazing flight. A great little chap, Sonny. I wish you could see him. And there is Scotty, the mascot. He is dashing about, barking at all the excitement. There is Joe Lamson, the assistant pilot, whom you all remember for his daring exploits on previous flights. He looks as calm as though he were just going up for a little test hop in one of the company's regular machines.

"Behind the famous crew are officials of the Apex factory, and Monsieur Reval, the inventor. I understand that Andy's father and mother did not wish to see their son begin such a spectacular flight. If so, perhaps they are tuned in on this station right now. I hope they are. Mr. and Mrs. Lane, if you are listening to these words, let me tell you that we are all proud of your son!

"Where is Sam Allen? We all love Sam. He won't have a chance to do his famous wing-walking stunt on this flight, I imagine. Oh, there he is! The photographers are trying to get him to come out of the *Apex* to have his picture taken with the others. He doesn't want to come. He shakes his head at them impa-

tiently. You can see that he is interested only in the plane.

"Ah, now Andy is asking him to come down. Sam is evidently telling the workmen to leave the ship before he does. Apparently he does not want anyone in the plane when he is not there, too. They get out, one by one. Now Sam gets down, joins the others and lines up for the movie men. That's over. They get back in the ship. The others walk rapidly away. They do not wish to be burned by the flaming gases from the rockets. I'm glad I'm a safe distance away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the great flight is about to begin!"

"Stand by, fellows!" called Andy, his voice tense and strained.

"Hey, wait a minute!" came a strange voice from the engine room.

Scotty growled, deep in his throat, and faced the door. Sam, who was just climbing into the hull, stood still in his tracks.

"I thought I got all those mechanics out!" he exclaimed.

A workman, his face and overalls smeared

with grease, ran out of the engine room, passed Sam's bulky form and began to climb down the ladder.

"I was testing the bolts down beside the rocket tubes and didn't hear you call," he explained, as his face disappeared below the door sill.

Andy watched him, a frown of perplexity on his face. Scotty still growled. Sam, angry, strode into the engine room and looked about.

"Andy, I suppose everything is all right, but it might be wise to check every single thing all over again," he said. "I'm sorry that fellow escaped me. I didn't mean to leave anyone alone here for a single minute."

"I hate to take the time," said Andy slowly. "Everyone is watching for us to go."

The four flyers stood together at the door of the engine room, looking about them at the now familiar apparatus.

"Did you know that man?" the young commander asked.

"Yes. He's worked at the factory for three months."

Sam's practiced eye ran over the machinery that he could see from where he stood. He knew every detail, now, for he had worked with Monsieur Reval fifteen hours a day ever since the flight had been decided upon.

"I don't see anything wrong," he said, doubtfully, "but it would take three or four hours to go over every bolt, nut and gadget in the plane. We really ought to do it, too."

Gone was the fat mechanic's grouching and bantering. As ever, in an emergency, he thought of nothing but the business at hand.

"What do the rest of you say?" demanded Andy, turning to Sonny and Joe. "Shall we postpone the flight until this afternoon, or shall we take a chance that a factory workman would not damage the ship."

"Let's take the chance!" snapped Joe decidedly.

"That's what I say," said Sonny.

"It's up to you!" said Sam.

"Good. Joe, shut the outside double door and be sure to tighten up the bolts which hold it tight. Then go to the wheel. Sonny, sit

down in your radio chair and strap yourself in. Sam, start the oxygen machine. Is that the generator I hear humming?"

"No," said the fat man, pressing some small levers and twisting some handles. He looked at the volt meter and ammeter. "That's the oxygen machine. I started it before I stepped out of the plane. The generator doesn't work till we take the air."

"All right, Sam, hook up your safety belt and get ready for the shock. We're going to take off immediately."

The mechanic clipped two straps to the broad leather belt which encircled his ample waist and snapped them to a heavy eyeholt in the wall. Then, holding tightly to two handlebars set against the nearest rocket tube, he braced himself, ready for the first explosion of the rockets which were to hurtle the ship to the upper air.

Andy, looking somewhat pale, slipped into his seat beside Joe and buckled his safety belt securely. The calm-faced Joe sat quietly alert, showing not a sign that anything unusual was about to happen.

The two men each grasped their dual-control

wheels and placed their feet upon the rudder pedals. Then, drawing a deep breath, Andy pressed the button which set fire to the first two rockets.

There was a tremendous hissing sound which turned into a roar. Through a tiny rear-view mirror set in front of him, Andy saw that flames filled the air behind the plane. The hull beneath him quivered slightly and then began to move ahead on the greased rails, gathering speed with astonishing swiftness.

Then he pressed the button which set fire to the remaining four rockets. In a split second the plane leaped ahead so fast that the inclined tracks ahead swept toward her as if by magic. Had they all not been strapped into their places they must have been hurled to the floor as the ship swooped up the incline with the speed of lightning. Almost before the pilots steadied themselves after the shock of the rising seats they were in the air, screaming upward at the same angle as that of the take-off tracks. The earth dropped away from them at a speed that caused Andy to catch his breath. As many hundreds and hundreds of hours as he had

flown, he had never imagined that altitude could be gained so fast. He fought down a strong impulse to turn off some of the rockets and to push down on the wheel, thus reducing the climbing angle. But she was a rocket ship and must be flown as such!

"Steady," he called to Joe. "Keep her climbing as she is!"

He glanced at the great altimeter—a special instrument, designed for the flight. His eyes opened wide in astonishment. Twenty thousand feet already, and the pointer was crawling around the dial like the second hand of a clock. Even as he looked at it, it passed the twenty-five thousand mark and continued on its way to higher figures.

CHAPTER VI

TROUBLE

The horizon was already dim in haze. The ground beneath was a crazy quilt of tiny green and brown patches. The launching rails had been pointed, this time, to face the northeast, so they shot away with their bow heading toward their destination. New York was still visible behind them in the haze, a toy-like city which surely could not be the greatest metropolis in the world! The Atlantic Ocean looked to be just beneath them, as they swept up and up. Long Island seemed but a tiny ribbon of land, cut off from New York and Connecticut by a little brook, instead of by Long Island Sound, a great arm of the sea. The Berkshire Mountains, far to the north, gave the fading horizon a slightly irregular appearance, but the mountains were so low, when compared to the steadily increasing altitude of the *Apex,* that they looked to be no larger than molehills.

"Level out just a little, Joe," called Andy.

Together they pushed slightly on the wheel and were surprised to find that the plane responded readily, despite her tremendous speed. The finger of the altimeter, which now indicated forty-two thousand feet, began to move upward more slowly.

The young commander glanced at the air-speed meter. Three hundred and fifty miles an hour! No one in the world, except the inventor of the plane, had ever traveled so fast. Yet the *Apex* was as steady as a house boat upon a mill pond. So swiftly was she speeding through the heights that she cut through every bump without the slightest swaying or careening. The two pilots scarcely moved the controls. Tiny adjustments alone were necessary to keep her exactly upon her course.

Montauk Point, the extreme easterly tip of Long Island, became visible in the haze below and slid beneath and astern. The sweeping hook of Cape Cod stretched away in the right foreground as though it extended for feet, rather than miles.

Joe looked at Andy with eyes of amazement.

He whistled, although the sound was lost in the hissing of the fiery tail astern.

"Some speed, old-timer!" was all he said.

Andy nodded and reached down to the instrument board, cutting off all but two of the rockets. Compared to the noise which the six fire tubes had made, the sound of the two was scarcely audible through the insulated walls.

The air-speed meter, which had gradually mounted to four hundred and twenty-five miles an hour, dropped to three hundred and ninety. The pointer on the altimeter flickered at fifty-four thousand feet.

"Boy, howdy!" muttered Joe. "Ten and a half miles in the air!"

"High enough," answered Andy. "We'll keep her level, now."

They pushed forward on the wheel, watching the bubble on the spirit level until it indicated that they were upon an exactly even keel. Cape Cod was astern, now, and they were headed straight out into the open Atlantic, with only Nova Scotia and Newfoundland between them and Europe.

"Look at that thermometer, Andy!" mar-

veled Joe, whose keen gray eyes were ever upon the instrument board.

Andy glanced at the instrument and he gasped in astonishment. One hundred and forty degrees below zero! Almost twice as cold as it had been during the terrific blizzard over the South Pole! But the faithful Sam had already turned the heaters on full blast and the electric glow, plus the protecting insulation between the double walls of the ship, kept the cabin comfortable and warm.

The young commander knew, also, that the mechanic had put the oxygen pump into operation and that it was operating successfully. Otherwise, they must have died at once for lack of the life-giving element.

Andy was perfectly free to admit to himself that it was taking him some time to become accustomed to the strangeness of this craft and to the remarkable height and speed at which it was plunging through the air. The familiar motion of former Apex ships was absent. This bullet-like plane acted like no other he had ever flown. And, of course, at this terrific altitude,

sky, earth, water—everything—did not seem the same.

"I guess I'd better make an inspection," he told Joe. "Can you hold her alone?"

"Sure," replied the other, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Flying her is a cinch."

Andy slipped out of his seat and went back to the combination sleeping-radio-dining room. There, utterly absorbed at his set, was Sonny, paying not the slightest attention to anything but an adjustment he was making on his panel with a long, thin screw driver. So far as he was concerned, it looked as though he neither knew nor cared whether the plane was resting securely upon the ground, or careening through the ether at incredible heights. At his feet, curled in a round bundle of tan and white fur, slept Scotty, the mascot. Andy remembered that upon each of the previous long flights, Scotty had chosen the radio room as his napping place whenever his master and Joe both occupied the twin seats of the control room.

Suddenly Sonny looked up and saw Andy. The lad's face was troubled. There was a

long wrinkle of perplexity on his forehead.

"Oh, Andy," he said. "I was just about to go and tell you. There is something the matter with the radio."

The commander's mind flashed back immediately to the mechanic who had remained aboard when Sam had ordered all the workmen off the ship. Could it be possible that Brewster's long arm had reached out to injure the radio set? If so, what else had he done?

"Is it serious, Sonny?" he asked quickly. "What's the matter with it?"

"I don't know, Andy," said the boy, his voice very discouraged. "I'm just taking off the panel to see if some wires are crossed somewhere. I'm so ashamed of myself, Andy! Early this morning, the set ran like a million dollars. I tested it out and everything worked perfectly. And now, when we need it, something's the matter with it!"

"Well, don't worry, old-timer," said Andy. "Let me know as soon as you've found out what the matter is and how long it will take you to fix it. Remember that we're due in Paris in about six hours, so if it's a total wreck,

there may not be any use trying to mend it."

The youngster, somewhat relieved by Andy's unworried tone, turned back to his set. Although the pilot had plenty, just then, to occupy his mind, he found time to laugh when he remembered that Sonny had asked nothing of the progress of the *Apex* through the air. What if they *were* flying at heights never before attained and at a speed undreamed of until the rocket plane had been invented? That meant nothing to Sonny unless everything was going smoothly in the radio set.

Andy swiftly made his way to the engine room. Sam set up a shout just as soon as he saw the pilot's head appear in the doorway.

"Great, leaping, shimmying, suffering snakes!" he exclaimed. "Is there something the matter with that air speed indicator and that altimeter up on the wall there?"

On the rear bulkhead was an instrument board which was almost a duplicate of that in the pilots' room. That was a good idea, thought Andy. He wondered why he had never thought of adding that convenience to any of the other big Apex flyers. The engineer could

learn anything about the condition of the ship that he needed to know without having to go to the pilot's room to look at the panel there.

"No," said Andy, "they are right. We're nearly ten miles up in the air and are speeding at something like four hundred miles an hour."

"Kid, it's lucky I started that oxygen compressor," stated the mechanic. "The air outside, besides being cold enough to freeze the nose off the Statue of Liberty, must be pretty thin right now."

"Yes," said Andy. "It is so rarified that we would probably not live a minute if we were out there, even if we were able to keep warm and breathe oxygen."

Sam's eyes wandered over his heavy steel rocket tubes which, cooled by a vent leading to the outside air, were hardly warm to the touch. Then he looked back to his captain, a twinkle in his merry eyes.

"Sweet sister!" he exclaimed. "Suppose we should spring a big leak?"

"The air inside would rush out," explained Andy, "and we'd probably be through worrying in a couple of minutes."

"Now you've taken all the joy out of the flight for me," mourned the fat man. "From here to Paris I'll be thinking of this crock as if it were a big tire, just waiting to blow out on us."

"Listen, Sam, be serious!" said Andy. "Sonny has just discovered that his radio set won't work. It occurred to me that that bird who was in here while you were having your picture taken might have done some damage. Have you found anything wrong in here?"

"Not a thing," Sam assured him. "Everything is running as sweet as clockwork. I have only to sit here and watch the gauges. So far I haven't done a single tap of work. I might as well be taking a nap in a bunk."

"Well, you'd better begin a careful inspection of everything," advised the boy. "I've got a hunch that fellow was up to dirt of some kind."

"Fair enough," agreed Sam, picking up a wrench and a screw driver. "I was just about to go over things, anyway."

CHAPTER VII

BROKEN CONTROLS

Ten minutes later, just as the *Apex* was roaring over a vast ocean of clouds which obscured all view of the Atlantic below, the first accident occurred.

Joe, who had been placidly conning the wheel, suddenly began to kick violently upon the rudder pedals, with an expression of intense surprise upon his usually placid features.

"Andy!" he called to the commander, who was standing beside the radio set, watching Sonny searching for the seat of the trouble.

The commander dashed for the control room.

"The rudder won't work!" called Joe.

For a moment, Andy was stunned. He had expected something to happen ever since Sonny had reported the radio out of commission. Nevertheless, the suddenness of the bad news took his breath away. He stepped forward to

look at the compass. The ship was gradually veering toward the southeast. He looked at the little circle of lights which indicated the rocket tubes that were, at the moment, firing. They were the two lower ones of the group, he noticed. One at the extreme bottom, the other, the lowest one on the port side.

"It may be the thrust of that port tube that is making us veer to the right," he said at last. "How does she handle, Joe?"

"There's no trouble with the ailerons and the flippers. Except for steering her to right or left, we could fly till our rockets give out."

Sam and Sonny were hastily called into conference. Both listened to the news without a sign of fear. At once the mechanic traced the rudder cables to the point where they left the hull through a sort of stuffing box. As far as he could follow the braided wire cables, they were in perfect condition.

"The trouble is outside the hull, fellows," he announced when he returned to the control room. "That means that it is impossible to fix it unless we can land somewhere."

"Couldn't we land on the water?" asked

Sonny. "The hull must be water-tight as well as air-tight."

"Yes, we could land on the surface," explained Andy, "but we couldn't take off again, even if we were lucky enough to set her down without a smash."

"I wonder if we could swing her around on a wing tip in a vertical bank, using our flippers for ruddering into the turn?" mused Joe, thoughtfully.

"I don't think we should attempt it," declared Andy, after a moment's consideration. "In the first place, without the use of our rudder to keep our nose up in the turn, she might slip into a spin. Once in a spin, we'd have no rudder to help us pull out of it. In the second place, this ship isn't built for that kind of maneuvering. She hasn't the wing area that she should have for her size and weight. Even trying to bank gently into a turn would be useless, for her forward speed would probably force us ahead in spite of it. You might do a fast barrel roll, but that's as far as you'd get."

"Well, we'll have to do something right away," said Joe. "The way she's going, she'll

gradually drift around in a huge circle. I'm sure that something has jammed the rudder so it is just a tiny bit twisted to the right. Otherwise the stabilizer would keep us going in a straight line."

"Listen, fellows," suggested Andy. "Why can't we steer the ship by firing the rockets on the left side when we want to go to the right and on the right side when we want to go to the left? The result might be like a rower who paddles with one oar when he wants to turn around."

"What will we do then?" asked the practical-minded Joe.

"If it works well, we can keep right on our course for France. If it doesn't, we'll try to steer in a circle to the westward and land on the first likely-looking spot we see. Then we can fix the thing and jump off again."

"Well, it's worth trying, anyway," agreed Joe, casually.

"I'd sure like to get my two mitts on that mechanic," said Sam. "The worst of it all is that we may not have seen the last of our troubles yet! That bird may have tinkered

with other things, too, and the results may show up at any minute."

"I'd better get back to my set while you fellows are experimenting," said Sonny, turning toward the door. "We may need to send some messages before long."

Andy knew full well that the lad meant to say "SOS messages." Well, he was right at that. Here they were, whirling through the upper air, unable to steer their plane one way or the other. What a mess! And with every fifteen minutes that elapsed, they would have covered another hundred miles toward somewhere!

"All right, Joe," he said, "I'm going to set off a rocket on the other side."

Joe nodded calmly.

Andy touched a switch that ignited a tube on the right side of the stern. The hissing sound increased in volume. The air speed indicator slowly responded to the added impetus of the third rocket. The two pilots studied the compass eagerly. The card swung a trifle and steadied down. Their hearts sank.

"Still heading too far to the southeast,"

muttered Andy. "Let's try killing one of the tubes on the left."

Switching off one of the port-side tubes which they had been using for nearly an hour, brought the *Apex Rocket* partly back to her course. But not enough to suit the anxious flyers. One tube after another they started and stopped, in an effort to drive the ship to the westward, toward land, or, failing that, straight eastward toward Europe. But no matter what they did, the bow always pointed slightly to the south of east.

"Joe's hunch was right," declared Sam at last. "The rudder is jammed so that it is slightly turned to one side. That's why the thrust of the rockets have very little effect on our course. We could run with all the off-center rockets burning and they still wouldn't counteract the turning effect of the rudder."

"Lucky the thing isn't turned hard right or hard left," muttered Joe, "or we'd stay up here turning in little circles like a kitten chasing its tail until we ran out of rockets."

"Well, that's just what we are doing," countered Andy positively, "except that we are

turning so gradually that it might take us several thousand miles to make a complete circle. We are only a very few degrees off our course, you know."

"Where will our present course take us?" asked Joe, operating the wheel almost automatically.

"I'll have to look at the charts to see," replied Andy, swinging out the chart board and measuring off courses and angles with a pair of dividers and parallel rules. He went over his figures time and time again, as if unable to believe what his calculations indicated. Then he turned back to the others, his face pale and set.

"According to my navigation," he said slowly, "if we keep gradually swinging to the right, the way we are now, we'll turn an immense half-circle which will swing us in a southerly direction until, eventually, we'll strike land somewhere on the northern shoulder of South America!"

There was a moment's silence while Joe and Sam digested the news.

"You take the controls, Andy," suggested

Joe, "and let me see if my figures agree with yours."

For nearly ten minutes Joe measured, projected and figured, while Sam watched over his shoulder. At last the assistant pilot turned away.

"Yes," he said, "it looks as though your figures were correct. I had hoped that in our course downward from the North to the South Atlantic, we might cross Bermuda or the Azores, or come near enough to them so that they might sight us. But it appears that when we swing down we go right between them, about halfway across to Africa."

"Have we rockets enough to last until we strike the South American coast?" asked Sam.

"Plenty," said Andy, after a quick calculation with pencil and paper. "That is, unless we are thrown off the course we are now traveling. I figure that it will take us about ten hours to cover the distance, which is, on the great curve that we're traveling, about four thousand miles."

"Yes, unless Brewster's men have done

something more to her which may show up at any time," added Joe pessimistically.

"Right," Andy agreed.

"Will we keep on flying at this height?" asked the mechanic. "I'll never feel safe as long as I can't open a window without blowing all our air away and flapping along like a flat tire!"

Andy grinned. Sam was grouching again, which proved that he had accepted the situation and was making the best of it.

"I think we'd better," he said. "The air is rarified up here to such an extent that I think we can probably make better time with the same amount of fuel than as though we went down to fifteen or eighteen thousand feet. Besides, what's the difference? If we have to stay up in the air, we might as well be up here as anywhere. We're comfortable, aren't we?"

"We're too high to see a ship if we should pass over one," protested Sam feebly, glancing out of the window. "Look, there are nothing but clouds below us."

Joe, who had been flying entirely by his instruments, looked down at a white ocean of

mist, which shut off all sight of the Atlantic, more than ten miles below.

"Those clouds," he said, "may be resting upon the ocean itself. "We're flying over a part of the ocean that is foggy most of the time."

"Yes, I know it," Sam agreed sadly. "I've been through several fogs here with you and Andy." He was silent for several seconds. Then he brightened. "Well, there's one consolation," he added. "I always did hate cold and we're flying down to the hottest part of South America!"

With that parting observation, he returned to his engine room.

Andy made one more attempt to steer the ship by firing various combinations of rocket tubes singly and in pairs. But the guiding force of the big rudder was too strong. She held straight on the course which she had assumed when the rudder pedals became useless. Then, cutting off all but the two rockets which were necessary to keep her hurtling through the air, he said:

"We've had many different experiences in

the air, Joe, but this is the first time we've ever gone careening through the skies like the ghost of the 'Flying Dutchman' without being able to steer an inch to right or to left."

"Yes," agreed Joe, smiling ruefully. "You'd better be good and economical with those rockets, old-timer. Because when they give out, down we go, whether we're over South America, Africa or the Antarctic Ocean. And, personally, I'd like to keep flying until I'm able to choose a nice soft spot for our landing place."

"Me, too," agreed Andy, whole-heartedly.

CHAPTER VIII

MORE TROUBLE

"LISTEN, you birds," came Sam's voice from the doorway. "We may not know where we are going, or how long we're going to be up here. That's all right. But if you think I signed up for a starvation cruise, you're all wet! Either we eat right now, or I'll open a window!"

"Open a window," countered Andy, "and it'll be a toss-up whether you freeze or die from lack of oxygen first."

"Well, if I get any hungrier," responded Sam, "I'll be so miserable I won't care!"

"I suppose you think you're going to gain forty or fifty pounds on this trip, as you do on every other long hop. Remember, you won't get any exercise walking the wings this time, so you really ought to diet a little."

"Me, diet?" demanded Sam, outraged. "I eat or I don't work. And it's nearly one-thirty

now. I like my lunch at twelve. We're an hour and a half late and that's all the delay that my union allows."

"All right then," agreed Andy. "Let's see what you can put on the table in the way of a ten-mile-high meal."

Sam turned away as contentedly as though nothing in the world had ever gone wrong with the ship.

"Seems like old times," laughed Andy, when he and Joe were alone in the pilot room, "to have Sam yell about his food."

"Yes," replied the other, "he'd eat a square meal if he knew we were going to crash five minutes after he was through. He'd scrape every plate clean just the same."

In the next room, Sam was whistling cheerfully at his work of getting dinner. If the truth were to be known, cooking was the only task that he loved better than caring for an Apex engine. He tossed pots, pans and dishes until Sonny, whose radio set was scarcely fifteen feet from the electric range, looked up from his absorbing work.

"What ho, little one, we are about to eat!"

announced the mechanic in high good humor. "Yes, sir, we are about to gather round and chew something that we'll remember if we live to a ripe old age—which, at this moment, seems none too likely. But that matters little, young man. My motto is—if you are about to crash, crash on a full stomach."

Sonny, who had almost forgotten that the plane could no longer be steered, looked out of a porthole.

"Where are we, Sam?" he asked vaguely. "And where are we headed for?"

"That, youngster," replied the good-natured Sam, "is a mystery which is, at present, being pondered by greater brains than mine. So far as the best minds in the pilots' room have determined, we are playing the jolly little game of 'Ring around the Rosy,' with the whole world as our playground. Right now, we seem to be zipping roguishly on a slanting course down the North Atlantic. Until this dizzy skyrocket runs out of smoke, we'll be dashing hither and yon until we strike land somewhere, sometime. Beyond that, I know nothing except that we are about to eat."

But Sonny's mind turned to his own troubles.

"Sam, have you anything I can use to wind a couple of coils on?"

"I might be able to rig up a little winding lathe for you. Have you found the trouble with your set?"

"Yes," said Sonny, despondently. "Two of the coils are burned out. Looks to me as though someone had deliberately jammed a screw driver into it."

"Maybe so. I'd just like to get close to that bird who is responsible for a whole lot of funny happenings around here. How long is it going to take to fix the set so it will percolate?"

"I can't possibly fix it before we get to Paris," replied Sonny, with a forlorn look in the brown eyes behind the big spectacles.

"Before we *what?*" Sam turned on the current under the electric boiler and swung around to face the boy.

"Before we get to Paris."

"Listen, son," said the mechanic. "If we had spare parts enough, you could build a half a dozen new sets before we see Paris."

"Is the rudder still out of order?"

"Nothing else but. So you'd better begin winding those coils. The world is going to crave to hear your signals long before you finish your repairs."

Sonny turned back to his set and Sam to his cooking. The appetizing odor of broiling steak, frying potatoes and boiling coffee seeped through the cabins. It even made its way forward, to the control room where Andy and Joe were trying to plan ways and means of saving the ship.

"Rudder or no rudder, I'm as hungry as a bear!" declared Andy, who had just finished taking an observation with his sextant. "There's nothing to do but to let her ride, Joe, so let's make the best of it. We're swinging a big circle, all right. We're heading almost exactly one hundred and twenty degrees now, and, according to the sun, we're about four hundred miles southeast of Cape Sable. So we're well off our Paris-bound course already. I still think we'll hit South America if we're able to keep going that long."

"Come and put on the nose bag!" came a cheerful shout from the main cabin.

"You go and eat, Andy," suggested Joe. "I'll stand my trick now and take my dinner when you are through."

The main cabin had been turned into a very fair imitation of a dining saloon. Sam had made a sort of breakfast nook out of a hinged table and some folding chairs. The steak, broiled to a crisp turn, was ready to serve.

Scotty, sitting up in Andy's lower berth, was cocking a hungry eye at the table, although he had eaten a huge breakfast just before the take-off. With one ear drooping, the other standing perfectly upright, he watched the boys cut into the steak. Then, seeing Sam looking at him, he tried to appear polite and indifferent. He yawned and looked into a far corner of the cabin. Then his eyes strayed back to Sam. But the mechanic was still staring. So Scotty scratched his left ear, then, disgusted with the whole affair, scratched at the blankets, turned around and around to make his bed comfortable and lay down. But one brown eye peeped over

a ridge in the blankets and fixed itself unwaveringly upon the platter.

"Cheer up, pup," laughed Sam, "you'll have the bone unless these hyenas gnaw it to powder." Scotty looked up. There was something in his friend's voice that sounded like food. But Sam continued talking to the dog. "They all kid me, Scotty, because they say I eat too much. Well, look at them now, I ask you. Look at your master tearing that steak to bits. Aren't you ashamed of him?"

Scotty regarded Sam reproachfully. This was foolish talk which led to nothing. So the disgusted dog turned his head away and went to sleep.

"Do you know, fellows," said the mechanic, "despite the fact that we seem to be bound toward goodness knows where, I am really enjoying myself more than I have on any of our recent hops. This bus reminds me of the first and second Apex ships. There was just a small crowd aboard and everything was care free, jolly and comfortable. Then we began flying bigger and bigger planes. Life became more

and more complicated. Finally, on the last *Apex,* when we all dressed up in blue-and-gold uniforms because we were carrying fifty passengers and had to eat in state—why, I was so upset that I nearly stuck my fork in my eye! I lost six pounds on that trip because I was ashamed to indulge my appetite. All the passengers kept looking at me until it got so I didn't enjoy my meals."

"You are not missing any bets on this one," observed Andy. "When Sonny looked out of the porthole just then you stole his meat, you jackal!"

Sonny reached out with his fork and retrieved the juicy morsel which the mechanic had just lifted from his plate. Sam, in no wise discouraged, made a motion toward Andy's plate.

"Listen, Sam," warned the commander. "This may be a small ship where you can do as you please, but don't forget that this may be our last meal for some time. So give us a chance!"

And so the meal progressed, as hilarious as though they were sitting in a Paris hotel, celebrating the safe landing of the *Apex Rocket.*

These companions had flown hundreds of thousands of miles together, through dangers that made the present trouble seem like an incident. Time and time again they had faced almost certain death. And in each emergency they had fought through to safety and success. Although this situation looked serious, there was not one of them who did not think that somehow they would succeed in saving themselves from total disaster. So, meanwhile, they enjoyed themselves.

The moment that Andy had finished a huge wedge of apple pie, he hastened into the control room to relieve Joe for lunch.

"Everything O.K. but the rudder," reported Joe briefly. "Compass bearing now one hundred and twenty-two degrees."

"Still swinging off, eh?" commented Andy, slipping into the alternate pilot's seat.

As he sat there alone in the little room, pushing and pulling the wheel a trifle to keep her from dipping or climbing, twisting it a bit to right or left to prevent too much swaying from side to side, the boy found it difficult to realize their predicament.

It was almost like sitting at the wheel in one of the former Apex ships, he thought. Except for the strange readings on the air-speed meter and the altimeter and for the looseness of the rudder pedals, the feeling of tooling this flaming four-hundred-mile-an-hour monster through the air was little different from that of handling the bigger, slower, gasoline-engine planes.

So tightly was the cabin enclosed from the outer air and so carefuly was it insulated from cold and noise that he had no consciousness of speed or chill. Miles below them was a white layer of clouds that stretched away on every side as far as the eye could see. The faint hum of the escaping gas from the rocket tubes told him that the plane was racing on and on at an unbelievable speed, yet the clouds seemed not to move. It was as though the ship was suspended from the sky by an invisible hook. It was, he knew, the height which made the plane appear to stand still. There was nothing with which to compare her speed.

Over the ocean, and at the altitude at which they were flying, the air was as smooth as a mill pond. There were neither bumps nor down

draughts to cause him to labor at the controls. Had the rudder been operating and had they been headed straight on their course toward Paris, he would have said that it was the easiest trip he had ever made.

According to his reckoning, they should be, by this time, almost opposite New York once more, but hundreds of miles out at sea. It felt odd, not to be able to kick right rudder and have the tremendous force of the flaming rockets carry them back to Mineola with the speed of a tornado. They had been out, now, three and a half hours. Had he been able to use his rudder, they would be back at their starting point in two more hours after a trip of over two thousand miles over the ocean! And they were still outward bound, heading in a sweeping curve, almost midway between Europe and North America! He shivered a little, although the cabin was warm.

Far, far ahead, the clouds rose in great jagged heaps. They reminded him of the towering Andes Mountains which he had passed on the way to the South Pole. He watched them narrowly. Surely the *Apex Rocket* would

pass over them with miles to spare. It would hardly be that clouds could extend upward to more than fifty thousand feet! He wished that the radio were in operation so that faithful little Sonny might search the seas below for a ship which would give them a weather report. But there was no use in wishing for the impossible. If those upflung clouds meant a storm, they would have to fly straight through it, as they could not turn to right or to left.

Joe returned to the cabin. His steely gray eyes immediately focused themselves upon the heavy cloud formation. He glanced at the compass and at the therometer. The temperature now stood at one hundred and forty-six below zero, although they were flying over warmer seas.

"Can we climb any higher, old-timer?" he asked at last.

"I was figuring, myself, that I'd rather climb over those clouds than to try to plunge through them without a rudder to help us fight squally weather," replied Andy.

He reached forward and pressed the switches controlling three more rockets. The hiss out-

side became louder. They could feel the plane gather speed beneath their feet. Joe took his place beside Andy and sat ready to give a hand at the controls.

The young commander began to lift the bow of the plane, heading still higher into the uncharted skies. Through the rear-view mirror he could see the gushing plume of fire and smoke stretching astern like the tail of a mighty comet. The pointer on the dial of the altimeter began its slow progress around the face of the instrument. Sixty thousand, sixty-two thousand, sixty-four thousand; never had man ventured nearly that high!

The thermometer indicated an incredible cold outside the double-walled hull. One hundred and fifty-three degrees below zero! Despite the insulation between the walls, a chill began to penetrate the cabins that even the redly glowing heaters could not dispel.

Andy reached over and touched the wall beside him. He drew his hand away instantly. It was like touching a solid block of ice. He noted a faint glaze of frost spreading over the inside of the portholes. Joe wiped it away

from the windows in front of the pilots' seats and it immediately began to gather again.

The air compressors and the oxygen blowers were now working at full speed. The flyers could hear them hissing from their position against the walls.

The great torpedo-shaped ship was eating up the miles. The cloud formations were slowly dropping below them. They would be able to climb over the topmost pinnacle of the storm mountain.

It swept beneath them, a gorgeous area of beauty under the afternoon sun. The westward side of those peaks of clouds was silvery white, the shadows in grayish black. It was an ugly-looking formation. Andy knew that the sea, now nearly twelve miles below, must be raging in a violent tempest. He was glad that they were not forced to fly through it at the ordinary height of the former Apex ships—fifteen or twenty thousand feet.

For the first time since they had left Mineola, he was conscious of a sense of speed. For now they had something with which to compare

their progress through the air. The plane no longer appeared to be suspended, motionless, in the sky. An upreaching cloud top appeared, rushed toward them with the speed of light and was whipped below them so fast that the eye could scarcely distinguish its outlines before it was left far astern.

The dial before Andy's eyes indicated a speed of nearly five hundred miles an hour. Every minute, they were covering eight and a third miles! No wonder the clouds swept under them at a dizzy rate!

"Sweet Susie!" exclaimed Sam, who had remained silent far longer than was usual for his blithe spirit. "I'm sure glad that we aren't flying at fifty-foot altitude and trying to jump over trees and church steeples at this rate. Wouldn't you boys be the busy little pilots, though?"

"And you should also be glad," Andy reminded him, "that you don't have to walk out on any wings to fix balky engines, as you did on our other flights."

"Boy howdy, I'll say so!" Sam agreed

heartily. "The wind would blow the hair right off my head. I'd come down off that wing as bald as a billiard ball."

"And as frozen as a big, fat, ice cream lollipop!" added Joe.

Sonny came into the control room and gazed out of the portholes with eyes that scarcely saw what they looked at.

"I just had to rest my fingers for a few minutes and to get them warm enough to work," he explained. If he saw the raging storm below, he was neither worried nor interested.

"Any idea when you'll have the set fixed?" asked Andy.

"I think I can patch it up so that we can receive messages in an hour or so if my fingers warm up so I can work," replied the boy. "But it's going to take some time to repair the transmitter so we can send. I've found about seven things wrong with it since I pulled it apart."

"How could anyone have damaged it that much in the few seconds it was left unguarded?" demanded Sam, whose conscience still hurt him because he had unknowingly permitted the bogus mechanic to run amuck in the

cabin while he had his picture taken with the others.

"Just by turning the power on and then jabbing around with a screw driver," responded Sonny. "Well, I must be getting back to work."

He returned to his beloved set.

"It's a funny thing, Andy," said Sam, suddenly. "I'm so sleepy that I can scarcely keep my eyes open."

Andy had been feeling drowsy, too, but had been ashamed to admit it. For the past five minutes, he had been conscious of being tired and weak, as though he had not slept for days. But he had laid it to his hard work before the flight and had striven to throw off the sensation.

Now, even as Sam spoke Andy realized that he had never been so tired in his life. The weight of the wheel was almost too much for him to push and pull. The sky took on a strange, grayish cast as though the sun were obscured behind a thunder cloud. A wave of dizziness swept over him.

He forced himself to sit upright and to look

around. Joe, who had been sitting quietly beside him, helping to fly the plane, was slumped down in his seat, asleep or unconscious, held only in his place by the wide safety belt about his waist.

Sam was leaning wearily against the front wall, shaking his head violently, as though to drive away the mists that filled his brain.

Something was very wrong. What was it? Andy realized that, 'way back in his head, he knew the reason. But he was too tired to think it out. It was so much easier to just sit there and doze off into a pleasant sleep. But a warning bell seemed to clang in his mind. *What was wrong?* He knew, if he could only force himself to remember!

Suddenly, by a tremendous effort of his fast-flagging mind, he concentrated upon the problem and the reason came to his consciousness.

"Sam!" he gasped weakly. "The oxygen machine has stopped! Quick! Fix it!"

Sam looked at him for a moment through dull eyes, then staggered back toward the engine room. The room grew darker. Andy's mind seemed to become a blank.

CHAPTER IX

A NINE-MILE FALL

Something was calling to Andy's half-conscious mind. He knew that he must open his eyes. But it was so easy just to allow himself to slip back into a comfortable doze. He was cold. The ship was trembling. She creaked and squeaked in every joint. It came to him that, as commander, he was needed. Immediately! He opened his eyes.

The cabin was plunged in gloom except for the softly glowing radium-painted instruments on the panel before him. He could see nothing through the windows except an opaque gray curtain. He was sagging forward in his seat, his chest pressing down upon the dual control wheel. He knew, suddenly, that the pressure of his limp body had shoved the wheel down and that the plane, answering the unconscious weight upon the controls, had nosed down into a vertical nose dive.

Down, down, she was screaming, the pull of gravity being aided by the tremendous force of the rockets which were still driving her. With a terrific effort, he straightened his weary body, gripped the wheel and tried to pull her out of her dive.

His befogged mind cleared a little. He leaned over and switched off all the rockets. Then he glanced at the altimeter. Sixteen thousand feet, it indicated, and the hand was rapidly inching downward across the numerals. They had fallen nearly forty-eight thousand feet while he had been unconscious! Only a plane built for such enormous speeds as this rocket ship could have stood such a strain without losing its wings and continuing its fall to destruction.

Still scarcely more than half-conscious, he fought automatically for control of the falling plane. Little by little her nose began to rise, but the pressure of the vibrating wheel against his hands was unbelievable. Could he bring her out of it before they crashed? The altimeter now indicated thirteen thousand feet. A sense of utter discouragement took possession

of him. He suddenly realized that she had too much momentum; that he had been unconscious too long. She had gathered too much downward speed. He could never bring her out of her dive single-handed. The pull of the wheel was too strong.

And then, as if by a miracle, Joe shivered and moved. He raised his drooping head and looked about him, rubbing his eyes. It was clear that he hardly knew where he was. But even before his senses were fully restored, his pilot's instinct came to the rescue. His hands reached out for the wheel.

Although he had no more strength than his weakened companion, his feeble pull turned the trick. Andy, whose hands strained on the trembling wheel, felt the ship's nose slowly but surely rise to normal, although she bucked and plunged like a frightened broncho.

The storm! They were in the midst of it, which accounted for the bleak grayness outside the cabin. Andy reached over and switched on all six rockets. Immediately the plane's motion became more steady as the powerful gases drove her through the eddies and cur-

rents in the storm clouds which had been tossing her about. His head was clearing now and his strength was returning.

"Brrrr, it's cold!" said Joe. "For the love of Mike, what happened? Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes," replied Andy. "And so did I. The oxygen supply must have been cut off. Sam went back to fix it but I don't know what happened then. I don't even know whether Sam and Sonny are dead or alive!"

"I feel better now," declared Joe, trying to subdue the chattering of his teeth. "I can hold her. You go and see how the others are."

Now that the ship was under control, Andy cut off three of the rockets which had helped to steady her as she cut through the storm that surrounded them. There was a terrific wind sweeping through the cabins. Papers, charts, log books and all sorts of odds and ends were whirling back and forth through the rooms. But it was warmer now and the temperature seemed to be rising with each passing moment.

Sonny was seated at his chair before the partially dismantled radio set, his head on the table, arms and hands dangling toward the

floor. Andy touched him in passing but there was such a commotion in the wind-swept cabin that the pilot was unable to determine whether the boy breathed or not.

Much as he wished to linger, he knew his first duty was to the safety of the ship, so, with a heavy heart, he turned away from the still figure and made his way into the engine room, where a veritable hurricane of wind roared in from a shattered window on the starboard side.

Laying on his side, just under the tool rack upon the forward bulkhead was Sam, as limp as a bundle of old clothes. Andy glanced at the oxygen machine. It was silent. So that *was* what had rendered them all unconscious! The air compressor which maintained the pressure within the enclosed hull was still whirring over, faithful to its duty.

Andy ran into the main cabin, seized Sonny's slight form beneath the armpits and dragged him to the engine room, where he held him beneath the broken window whence came the terrific wind. Then, straightening up, he saw Sam stir restlessly and push himself to a sitting position, looking about him with wildly rolling

eyes. With the blast of wind upon his face, Sonny's pale cheeks began to show a little color. In a moment, he, too, was trying to sit up. Sam's lips moved, but the wind from the broken porthole whistled so that Andy could not distinguish a word.

The mechanic rose wearily to his feet and tottered into the main cabin, where he sat down in a chair, still weak and sick. Andy lifted Sonny and carried him back into the room where unconsciousness had overtaken him and placed him tenderly upon the bunk beside Scotty, who appeared to be just waking from a nap.

"I'm sorry, Andy!" murmured Sonny. "I was so tired I just dropped off to sleep. Let me get up and work on the radio."

"You stay right where you are or I'll tie you down," said Andy, his heart going out to the faithful boy who thought of his duty before everything else.

The plane rocked violently and, through the opening in the engine room, the wind screamed like a siren. Andy steadied himself against the wall and switched on the electric lights.

"Never, never again!" exclaimed Sam, finding his voice at last. "If I ever go up any higher than I can jump, I hope some one will shoot me!"

"Tell me what you did, Sam," suggested Andy.

"Why, I reeled back into the engine room, growing sleepier every second. I saw that something had happened to the oxygen machine and that if we didn't have some air in a minute we'd all be goners. I knew that I didn't have time to do any tinkering with it. My strength lasted just long enough to grab a spanner off the tool rack and shy it through the porthole. Then I dozed off into a little nap."

"The only thing that saved our fool necks," said Andy thoughtfully, "was that both Joe and I had passed out by that time and that the old boat was heading downward in a power dive. If we hadn't been breaking all sorts of records in the speed of our fall, we'd probably have been frozen to death, or would have died because of the change of air pressure long before we reached the lower levels where the incoming oxygen would do us any good. When

you busted the glass there wasn't any oxygen to speak of, but there was plenty of cold. But luckily we got down in time to even things up. And now, at the altitude we are flying, it isn't cold, there is plenty of air and we're sitting pretty."

"I'm not," grumbled Sam. "I feel a draught from that open porthole and I don't know how I'm going to stop it, either. I never was any good at glazing windows, especially with a three or four-hundred-mile-an-hour wind blowing through the hole."

"Well," smiled Andy, his heart light again at the knowledge that all aboard were still alive and healthy. "That's your worry. I've got to help Joe steer through this storm."

Sam, still muttering about the discomforts of flying, promising all and sundry that if he lived to see New York again he would never be found higher than the second floor of a building, staggered into his engine room. The moment that he had disappeared, Sonny rolled off the bed, reeled across the swaying floor and sat down at his littered radio table. His head still felt as heavy as a cannon ball and his hands as

useless as though the fingers were all thumbs. But he had his work cut out for him, work which must be finished, whether he felt like it or not.

Joe, at the wheel, was fighting the storm. The ship seemed to be wrapped in a heavy gray coverlet. There was no break in the impenetrable mist. The air was terrifically bumpy but the sheer forward momentum of the rocket ship carried her through the turmoil which would undoubtedly have torn an ordinary airplane to bits. Her hull had been built to withstand speeds of five hundred miles an hour or better and the stresses and strains of the screaming winds made no impression at all upon her husky framework. But how she did toss and twist! Joe's powerful arms and shoulders were already weary from the constant motion of the wheel. His face was drawn and marked with the lines of fatigue.

"Some afternoon!" he said with a wry smile, "Are they all right, back there?"

"Yes, they had both passed out but came to in a few minutes. Sam smashed in a porthole and let in some air."

"Lucky you and I did a fade out that let us down to warm weather," commented Joe. Then the two devoted their full attention to steering.

Andy knew that the bad weather could not last very much longer. At the rate they were traveling, they were sure to work their way out of the most extended low pressure area. He would have given much for a glimpse at the sun in order to make an observation. The compass had, little by little, swung around until it was now heading nearly due south. According to Andy's dead reckoning, they must be somewhere off the West Indies, at a point almost midway between that group of islands and the northeastern coast of Africa. The immense speed of the ship had kept her on her course as straight as a bullet, except for the slow, even deflection caused by the slightly twisted rudder. Had she possessed no more than the usual speed of a standard airplane, she might have been blown this way and that by the varying winds of the storm and the upper air. But on and on she plowed, as though answering the unvarying tug of a magnet.

It came to Andy that the wind no longer

howled through the cabins. Turning the controls over to Joe, he made his way back to the engine room. The door between the main cabin where Sonny still worked upon his radio and the engine compartment was closed. Andy entered and was met by a blast of wind that nearly hurled him back into the bow.

There, seated disconsolately beside the rocket tubes, fussing over the oxygen machine, was Sam, his face red and his hair tousled.

"Shuffling Sadie!" he exclaimed. "Shut that door, will you, Andy? The wind isn't half so bad when it is confined to this coop. But it's bad enough," he added gloomily as Andy closed the door and leaned against it.

"Can't you fix the broken window?" asked the commander.

"Just try pushing anything against a four-hundred-mile wind, to say nothing of trying to fasten it there. It's blown the fillings out of three of my teeth already. While I was trying to fix that porthole I thought of how funny you looked dozing off when the oxygen went out and I started to smile. Well, sir, the wind hit my front teeth so hard that I can wiggle them

half an inch with my tongue. If I should sneeze they'd go shooting around the room like bullets. That's why I'm so afraid of the draught."

"Well, if you feel like sneezing, just press your first finger hard against your upper lip just under your nose," advised Andy.

"And push in all those loose front teeth? I should say not. It would be more fun to sneeze."

"Go ahead and sneeze, then, if you'd enjoy it," laughed the boy. "When we get to wherever we're going, we'll buy you a nice new set of store teeth and charge it up to the company."

"When *do* we land, anyway?" demanded Sam, anxiously.

"I don't know," replied the pilot. "If we keep on plowing along the way we are going, we ought to hit the South American coast just after dark. Then it's up to us to make a landing just as soon as we find a smooth place."

"Listen, Andy," exclaimed Sam, struck by a brilliant idea. "We have been turning a great, sweeping curve ever since we left a spot some-

where near Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, haven't we, kid?"

"Yes."

"And on account of our terrific speed, we have scarcely deviated an inch from our curving course. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, why couldn't we just stay right up in the air and complete the circle? It would eventually take us right back to the United States, where there are plenty of good landing fields, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. I followed the line of the circle when we first knew that we were flying a steady course. If we kept on the way we are going now, we would fly inland over Brazil along the upper reaches of the Amazon River, across the northern shoulder of Bolivia, over the Andes just south of Callao, Peru and then out over the the Pacific. If we were able to stay up and did not change our course, we would swing north over the Pacific and begin the eastward part of our circle somewhere near San Diego, California. We would pass Denver a few miles to the north, then almost over Minneapolis and

swing into Canada at the Sault Ste Marie. We'd pass right across Montreal and then begin to curve southward over Maine. We'd be, a few minutes later, right where our rudder went bad, just off Cape Sable."

Sam listened thoughtfully.

"Why don't we give ourselves a real run for our money, then," he asked at last. "Stay in the air and let's see how far we'll get."

"Not unless the rest of you vote me down," replied Andy.

"I've never voted against you in my life," declared Sam. "What do *you* want to do?"

"We started for Paris. That's where I want to go."

"Sweet cookie!" Sam tore his hair. "Here we are, heading away from Paris at the rate of four hundred miles an hour, beating in for the jungles of South America and the boy wants to go to Paris! You ought to be put in a padded cell! But if you want to go to Shanghai, I'm with you, you blithering idiot! At the same time, before you send picture post cards of Paris back to Mr. Avery and the rest, I'd suggest you land this flying skyrocket in a nice,

soft place, so that I can repair the rudder."

"All right, we'll do our best," smiled Andy. "Now I must take my trick at the wheel. You get busy on that oxygen machine. We'll need it on the way to Paris."

Leaving Sam to shake his head dolefully, Andy went back to the control room where Joe, calm and vigilant, was keeping the ship upon an even keel while she hurtled through the storm clouds.

"You'd better turn in now, Joe, and take a nap," Andy said. "There's no telling when we'll get any regular sleep, so we'd better begin to take regular watches."

"We should be out of these clouds before long," declared the assistant pilot, rising and stretching himself. "It isn't so bumpy now and the clouds are becoming lighter."

Joe entered the main cabin, pausing a moment to watch Sonny, who still worked at his radio set.

"How is it coming, old-timer?" he asked.

"I'll be able to listen, I think, in a few minutes," replied the boy, probing into the innermost depths of the apparatus with a red hot

electric soldering iron, "but there's no telling when I can send. Not before morning, anyway, I should say."

"Well, don't worry. It will be fun listening to the incoming messages, anyway. Have we a loud-speaker system on this ship as we had on the others?"

"Yes. I installed it myself. There's a speaker in the control room, another one here. They're concealed behind the paneling. That's why you didn't see them."

Joe yawned and turned away. Scotty, still sleeping, was stretched across the lower berth. Not for the world would the pilot have disturbed the mascot, so he crawled into the topmost bunk, close under the ceiling, and, after a few moments of twisting and turning, fell into a deep slumber.

CHAPTER X

SONNY REPAIRS THE RADIO

Half an hour after Andy had taken over the controls, the *Apex Rocket* burst out of the clouds and forged ahead through a clear sky of brilliant tropic blue. The boy blinked and squinted in the brilliant rays of the sun, which was now low on the western horizon, slightly to the right of the bow. Ever since the ship had hurtled down from the sky in the dive which had so nearly ended in disaster, the air within the thoroughly chilled cabins had been growing warmer and warmer. Although the insulation between the inner and outer walls was keeping out the tropic heat as efficiently as it had the cold of the upper air, a hurricane of balmy wind was blowing through the broken porthole in the engine room and gradually penetrating throughout the cabins.

Andy wished, now, that Joe had delayed his nap so that he could leave the controls long

enough to take an observation to find out where they were. He was sure that they would strike the coast within the next few hours, but he would have liked to have spotted their position accurately upon the chart. If it became necessary to send out an SOS, the information would be necessary for the proper guidance of those who might set out to rescue them. But he resolved to wait until the last possible moment, to give Joe as much rest as possible. No one knew what adventures night might bring and they would need Joe's strength.

How far away New York seemed now! To think that they had eaten breakfast at Mineola! And now they were over the South Atlantic after the wildest, fastest, most perilous journey that man had ever taken in an airplane! What a shame that an enemy had ruined what might have been the most successful, the most spectacular flight that Andy and his little group of world wanderers had ever made.

The pilot's eyes narrowed as he thought of Herbert Brewster and of the man who, in the coveralls of a mechanic, had smuggled himself into the closely guarded cabin. How Brewster

had hated him ever since the former engineer had been unable to stop the famous fifteen-day nonstop flight! Time after time Andy and Brewster had locked horns. And so far, at least, Andy had been victorious. Well, it should be so this time, too. The boy knew full well that if disaster should overtake this flight, Mr. Avery would give up his rights to the rocket plane in disgust. And that would be a victory for Brewster! Andy could not stand that thought. Brewster must not win. There was too much at stake.

The plane was flying as steadily, as evenly, as a fast roadster upon a concrete highway. There was none of the roar and the vibration to which the boy had become accustomed while piloting the planes driven by several powerful gasoline motors. This ship seemed to swim through the air with only the steady hiss of the flaming rockets to break the silence. All noise of wind through the struts was quenched by the insulated lining. Yes, it was pleasant, flying this marvelous ship through still tropic skies. Had they only been headed in the right direction!

Sonny ran into the control room, his eyes shining with excitement.

"Andy," he shouted. "The set's fixed so I can hear!"

"Fine!" applauded the pilot.

"The air is simply jammed with messages about us. The operators of the Navy station at Arlington are asking every ship and shore station if they have seen us. They are telling the ship captains that we were last reported by a ship nearly a hundred miles south of Sable Island and that we were then far off our course. They are saying that a steamer bound from Barbados to Gibraltar saw a long smoke streak in the sky in mid-ocean early this afternoon but they as much as say they don't believe the report. Since the steamer captain reported the streak headed south at that point, midway between Africa and the West Indies, the Navy cannot believe it was we."

"I wonder why we didn't see that ship," mused Andy. "Still, I wouldn't have dared to try a landing in mid-ocean anyway, unless we were running out of rockets."

"The Eiffel Tower, in Paris," continued the

boy, "reports that thousands and thousands of people are already gathered at Le Bourget Field to see us land. The British are going to light all their airports if we are not reported by nightfall. The Germans are going to do the same. The big German air line, the Lufthansa, has already sent out several of its big ships to see if they can find us."

"Have you tried to tune into the broadcasting range yet?" asked Andy.

"No. I just listened to the first few messages I picked up on the high-wave stations and then dashed in to tell you."

"If you can pick up any of the broadcasting stations, you might switch it on the loud speaker. It'll help to pass the time away. Can you work at repairing the transmitter while the receiver is going?"

"Sure. And I'll do it right away."

Sam entered the control room just as Sonny was leaving. His plump, round face was wreathed in smiles.

"What ho, boys and girls," he called. "You can have all the laughing gas you want now. Any time you want to feel a little peppier, just

tell papa and I'll blow some oxygen through the plane that will make you think that you are blood brothers to eagles. You'll want to jump overboard, flap your wings and crow, or croak, or whatever it is that eagles do."

"We'd do both," retorted Andy. "If you are a wonderful little fixer, why don't you get out on the hull and fix the rudder so we can fly where we are supposed to?"

"Give me a stepladder and something outside to prop it on and I will," offered the mechanic.

"Pipe down, Sam," said Andy, serious again. "You sit here and steer the plane for a minute while I get my sextant and take an observation, will you?"

"Sure." Sam eased his heavy figure into the little seat. "I haven't done any high, wide and fancy flying since our last trans-Atlantic hop."

"Take the wheel, then," directed Andy. "But be careful to handle the controls gently. She's very sensitive and if you should push her down too suddenly, we'd hit the ocean before you had time to bat an eye."

Sam looked alarmed at this, but since Andy was already out of his seat, there was nothing for the mechanic to do but to hold the wheel, which he did very tenderly. Sonny returned to his radio set. Andy got out his sextant and chronometer and busied himself taking a last observation upon the sun.

"You are doing pretty well, Sam," Andy told him when he completed his long task of sighting exactly upon the fast-setting ball of fire. "Just hold her like that until I do my calculating."

"Leaping bullfrogs, don't go away and leave me!" begged Sam. "I might begin to itch, or something, and have to scratch myself. And as sure as the world, there'd be nothing but a great big splash and a lot of ripples chasing themselves across the ocean."

But Andy paid no attention to the other's protests. He got out his charts and navigation instruments and began to figure upon a pad. Then, comparing his totals with the chart, he drew a long sigh of relief.

"That's over," he said. "I hate navigation. Too much arithmetic. Well, Sam, old dead

weight, we'll have to make a blind landing somewhere about nine o'clock to-night. And if a night landing in a four-hundred-mile-an-hour plane isn't something to worry about, I don't know what is!"

"Why don't we stay aloft till daybreak, then?"

"We haven't enough rockets to spare. We'll have to come down as soon as we find a fair-to-middling place in order to have enough left to get us to Paris."

"If you keep on like this," muttered Sam, shaking his head, "I'll be losing all my appetite for dinner. Suppose you take the wheel and let me toss something on the broiler. With a good meal as ballast, I can stand a lot more grief than I can now, when every time I pat my stomach, I nearly knock my backbone out of joint."

Just as Andy took his place behind the nearer of the two control wheels, there was a frying, crackling sound from the upper right corner of the control room that made him start violently. Was some vital part of the ship giving away?

But no. There came a faint sound of music filtering through static, music which grew louder and louder as Sonny adjusted his dials and rheostats. Its familiar melody was one from a current success on Broadway; Andy found himself whistling in cadence with the saxophones. Little by little Sonny's skillful fingers built up the volume until the jazzy tune filled the entire room, overshadowing the steady, subdued roar from the rocket gases.

"Now I know," said Sam with a wide-toothed grin, "why movie directors used to have music on their sets during the acting. It got the players in the right spirit for their work. A minute or two, I was feeling pretty low in my mind. Now I could tweak a wildcat's nose and tie a knot in a rattlesnake's tail. I'm just that cheerful."

"So am I," agreed Andy, as the music broke off and the velvety voice of an announcer told them that the music was coming from the grill-room of a New York hotel. "Beat it, now, Fatty, and shake up a meal that will make you and the rest of us fit for a good night's work somewhere. When it's ready, call Joe and let

him eat before coming to take the wheel."

The glowing, incandescent sun touched its rim to the hard line of the western horizon and began to dive out of sight with extraordinary rapidity. The sea below was already in darkness. It was night down there but those in the plane still had a few more moments of daylight. Down, down, went the sun, sinking so fast that the eye could follow its descent. There was no twilight, here in the tropics. It was day; then it was night. Someone in the rear cabin turned on the electric lights and closed the door leading to the pilots' room. Andy was left in the darkness with only the dance orchestra from New York to keep him company. The reflected light from the instrument board made it easy for him to keep the plane level in the air. Since there was no steering to be done, flying was simplicity itself.

Another pause came in the music. The announcer's voice filled the darkened cabin.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the invisible audience," came the voice, "we are very sorry not to have more reassuring news of the *Apex Rocket* and her gallant crew. As you all know,

she has been overdue at Paris for some time and her radio has been silent ever since she left the ground at Mineola this morning. Although she was to have made her journey over the northern shipping route, no ship has reported her since Captain Mallory, of the *Republic,* sighted her south of Sable Island. Except, of course, for the captain of the Spanish steamer who reported some smoke in the sky in mid-ocean, east of the West Indies. But, as we have previously announced, that report has not been generally credited.

"Extra lookouts have been placed on every steamer sailing the North Atlantic Ocean. If no favorable reports are received by nine o'clock this evening, destroyers from the Boston and Brooklyn Navy Yards will speed out to sea to begin a search. The British Admiralty has notified the United States Navy that British warships will join the hunt in gratitude for the magnificent rescue of the airship *Britain* by Andy Lane and his crew.

"If those aboard the overdue rocket plane have descended to the water and are able to repair their radio set, rescue parties will not

be long in reaching them. Direction-finding radio sets are listening for their first SOS signals. If distress signals are received, the location of the plane's set will be soon established.

"Flying boats, amphibians and fast airplanes are standing by at a dozen airports, ready to speed to the rescue as soon as orders are issued. Wherever the missing ship may be down, one of these planes should reach her soon.

"We will continue these reports, ladies and gentlemen, at frequent intervals until definite news of the *Apex Rocket* has been received, or until she has been definitely given up as lost."

The music blared forth again.

"'Wherever the missing ship may be down,'" Andy repeated to himself with a wry grin, "'one of these planes should reach her soon!' I wonder what that bird would say about it if he knew we would be making a landing in South America in the next few hours!"

CHAPTER XI

IN THE JUNGLE

Andy was first to sight land. He, Sam and Joe, in the pilots' cabin, had been staring straight ahead into the darkness for an hour or more, while Sonny worked on the radio transmitter, with Scotty keeping him company.

So, while the American jazz band filled the air with its dance music, the flaming rocket ship screamed ahead toward the land which all knew could not be far away.

"There it is!" yelled Andy suddenly, pointing downward to a spot where the grayish black of the ocean gave place to a solid mass of pitch black which stretched away in front of them until it blended into the darkness of the night.

In another instant they were over it, hoping against hope that they would see the friendly lights of a city, a town, or even a house. But all was as dark as the bottom of a coal mine.

Andy flashed on a tiny lamp over the chart

table and studied his maps in silence. The air of the cabin was moist and warm and filled with a queer fragrance that blew in through the broken engine room porthole and then percolated through the ship. It was a strange odor of decaying vegetation, of lush, rank flowers and other unknown tropic things.

"So far as I can see," he said at last, rolling up his chart, "We may as well look around for a landing here as anywhere. If my navigation is right, the Amazon River is just to the south of us and we are cutting a slanting course which will take us for hundreds and hundreds of miles along its path. There are no mountains near. We'd better not get too far inland."

"Right," agreed Joe briefly.

"Sam, you go back and be sure that Sonny and Scotty have their safety belts on and are prepared for a crash. Then you get yourself in a nice soft place and thank your lucky stars your bones are well covered with fat."

"Guess I'd better stay in with the kid and the pup," said Sam soberly. "If we do crash, there'll be a fat boy squalling for help back

there, so don't forget me. See you again sometime. Tootle-oo!"

He disappeared, whistling a gay tune to keep his spirits up. In a moment the music from the radio suddenly ceased. Sonny was preparing himself for whatever might come. Andy hoped that the dog was well wrapped in blankets.

He took his seat beside Joe.

"Now that it's time to put her down," he admitted to his assistant, "I'm tempted to postpone the evil moment as long as possible."

"Me too," replied Joe. "But I'd rather make a power landing here than a forced landing on top of the Andes where we wouldn't have a show in the world if we didn't hit a lucky place. It might be better to try to land in the Amazon, though."

"We'd never fly again if we did," stated Andy positively. "If the hull stood the shock of landing, the water would pour in the broken window, and into the rocket tubes. Chances are that all our rockets, even in the rocket compartment, would be ruined and we'd be through until someone found us."

"All right. This old bus will stand considerable of a shock. Let's put her down and hope that we can repair the damage."

Andy turned off the rockets and nosed down, at the same time switching on the powerful searchlights which pointed downward for night landings. Built as she was for tremendous speeds, the *Apex Rocket* dived toward the earth like a falling bullet. The pilots nosed her up to kill her speed as much as possible without going into a tail spin, all the while staring ahead looking for a place where there might be a chance to land. Andy's fingers was close by the rocket switches. If the ground looked to be altogether impossible for a landing, he would switch on all six tubes and continue in his flight until a better place might be found.

The wind whooped around the torpedo-shaped hull. The searchlights cut great slices out of the darkness and, as the plane descended, began to bring out the details of the ground below. At first the pilots thought they were approaching a level field of wheat, for the ground looked perfectly flat, covered by a gently waving green surface. Then they knew it to be a

forest, so dense and smooth on top that they had mistaken it for wheat. Were the trees tall and possessed of great, thick trunks which would crush the hull of the plane? Or were they low and scrubby? Upon the answer to this question would depend their lives, were they to land here.

Andy snapped on the rockets. The plane leaped ahead, picking up speed instantly.

"Better not risk it here," he explained, "Let's go on a bit."

Steering was difficult. They were barely a thousand feet above the tree tops and, at their terrific speed, the slightest nose dive would have plunged them into the forest before they would have time to draw a single breath. They dared move the flippers only by fractions of an inch at a time. So fast were they flying, under the kick of all six rockets, that the forest below was blurred. It looked as smooth as the top of a billiard table.

"Let's try again," suggested Joe. "I see a light spot way ahead that is probably a river. Better put her down on this side of it if we can. At least we know it isn't a swampy bog here."

Even as he spoke, Andy switched off the rockets. They slid down very gently, striving to judge the height of the trees beneath the vivid white beams of the landing lights.

"Look!" exclaimed Joe. "There are patches of clear land here! Let's watch for one ahead, then try to pancake down into it."

"Good," agreed Andy. "Watch for the next."

They nosed down, leveling out almost over the swaying tree tops, which were rushing beneath them at thrice the speed of the fastest express train. The plane's momentum carried her ahead for many seconds. Then she began to lose speed. Andy was about to switch in the rockets once more, lest she fall off in a spin when Joe yelled:

"There's one!"

Flashing toward them was a little clearing, a few acres of ground upon which no trees grew. But it was far too small for a safe landing. Yet it was the best that had been offered.

With a quick motion, Andy switched on the bow rocket, which instantly fizzed out ahead of them like a tremendous fusee. At the same

time, the two pilots, acting as though they had a single brain which controlled the motions of both, nosed down. The same switch that exploded the forward rocket, lowered the landing wheels. Andy felt the undercarriage swish through the upper branches of the trees at the near end of the clearing.

Below and in front of them everything was illuminated by a strange glare. The white electric beam of the searchlight combined with the crimson and yellow flare of the rocket to cast an unearthly light upon the oncoming, tree-fringed clearing. The earth seemed to leap up to meet them although the trees at the other end of the bare patch were approaching with such swiftness that Andy was sure they would never stop in time to prevent a crash.

Bump! The wheels struck the earth. The plane careened far over on her left side, then straightened out as the two pilots swung their full weight on the controls. The rocket in the bow, firing straight ahead, was exerting its full force to slow up their forward speed. But the plane rolled ahead under her terrific momentum. They seemed to dash across the little

clearing as though it extended a matter of inches instead of many yards. Despite the flaming gases which pushed back against them, they rolled heavily into the trees. But fortunately they were scrubby, young trees, whose trunks bent and splintered under the tank-like charge of the metal hull and wings.

There came a series of shocks. The ship was rolling, it seemed, into a strangely lighted tunnel in the forest, a tunnel which flamed with fire as it swept toward them like a scene on a motion picture screen. The plane jerked and bumped, to the tune of splintering wood and falling branches.

But at last—it seemed to have been hours since the wheels touched the ground—she lurched to a stop. The view out of the pilots' cabin windows was cut off by a screen of leaves and branches which had, in falling, wrapped themselves about her bullet-shaped bow. Andy, feeling as though all his strength had left him, reached over and cut off the bow rocket before it should set the woods afire. But the searchlight under the hull and wings still cast its

ghostly white light in a wide apron ahead of them.

The two pilots then sat perfectly still, drawing long sighs of relief. They seemed to have passed through a lifetime of danger in the past half-minute.

"Is everyone all right?" came Sam's worried voice from the cabin.

"Yes," replied Andy wearily.

The lights in the control room were snapped on and Sam, Sonny and Scotty came in, the first two looking very anxious, the pup barking and leaping about in the excitement of the unusual commotion. Sam's glance traveled swiftly about the room, searching for damage to the plane. Then he drew a long breath of relief.

"Well, now we're here," he said, with the old twinkle in his eyes. "Where are we?"

Andy was too tired to answer. He sat slumped in his seat, waiting for his weary and jumping nerves to come to rest.

"Listen, old-timer," said Joe quietly, "I think it's about time you turned in for a shut-eye. You've had all the responsibility and

most of the work, too. The combination is enough to stagger an elephant. You hit the hay for a few minutes while the rest of us scout around and see what it's all about."

Andy shook himself out of his apathy and rose.

"I'll take my bunk fatigue after a while," he said firmly. "Now I'm going out to see what we're up against when it comes to getting out of here. Have you any flash lights, Sam?"

"Have I two hands?" retorted the mechanic. "I always have three or four flash lights, even if I have to leave my red flannels at home to save weight."

"All right, let's look around."

While Sam went for the lights, Andy and Joe unscrewed the heavy bolts which held the steel door flush against the smooth side of the hull. Then, dropping a small rope ladder to the ground, they descended into the heart of the great Amazonian jungle.

CHAPTER XII

A FACE AT THE PORTHOLE

"Wow!" exclaimed Sam, puffing down the ladder, "it's as dark as the inside of a cow's third stomach!"

"Come up ahead where the landing light shines," suggested Sonny, who had carried Scotty down the rope ladder with much difficulty.

"It doesn't look much sweeter up there in the light than it does here in the dark," objected Sam, who was clearly more at home in a skyrocketing plane than in the midst of a jungle.

Nor was Scotty any too happy. He walked close to Andy's legs, whimpering and growling deep in his throat. When he emerged into the brilliantly lighted area under the bow light, he was a forlorn-looking pup. His tail was in a perfect semicircle between his legs. The white ruff of fur around his neck was bristling. His

ears were laid well back upon his narrow head and his eyes rolled wildly. As the others laughed at him, he looked at them reproachfully, then continued his throaty growl.

The vegetation itself was not pleasant to look upon. Except where the sturdy hull of the airplane had plowed a wide swath, tree trunks, underbrush and twining creepers formed an almost solid barrier in every direction. It was a tangle of wood, leaves and fiber such as none of the four flyers had ever seen before.

"Sweet spirits of niter," murmured Sam in a voice that shook, "but those vines look like snakes! What's more, I'll bet there *are* snakes here. And I don't like snakes. I don't even like worms. I hate worms so much that I won't go trout fishing unless someone baits the hook for me!"

At that, the tension was broken. His three companions roared with laughter at the idea of Sam, who had saved Apex flights from disaster times without number in his cool disregard of danger, being afraid of garden worms. Sam, who had leaped from the speeding *Apex* am-

phibian to the envelope of the drifting airship *Britain,* afraid of common bait worms!

But the place did have a spooky appearance. The glare of the lights cast tremendous shadows in the jungle, shadows that seemed to move and to dance as the four adventurers moved about. Everything seemed so lush and so green that Andy wondered if it would not grow over and around the airplane before they could take off. The strange, marshy odor that he had first noticed in the cabin now filled his nostrils. It was the odor of the jungle. Although he had never smelled it before, he would have recognized it anywhere. A tremendous flower, lavender and pink and blue, peeped out from behind the trunk of a tree. It was an orchid, as big as a man's head, and of a kind that an orchid hunter would have risked death to find. But to the flyers, who looked at the strange bloom amid the dancing lights and shadows, it seemed an unpleasant thing, something to be feared, even.

"I wish we had a helicopter, or an autogyro, or something," mourned Sam, who was not enjoying himself. "Then we could ease right out

of here to-night. I've had a lot of flying, to-day, and have covered a whole flock of miles. But I'm a bear for punishment and I'd like a whole lot more flying, provided it started right away."

But Andy was not listening. He was making his way through the tangle of roots and creepers, flashing his hand lamp upon the ship's structure. Undercarriage, fuselage, wings and tail structure he examined, foot by foot. His flash light lingered when it came to the point where the rudder control became a rod, working through the air-tight slide into the cabin.

"Give me a hand here, Joe and Sam," he called. "Boost me up so I can find out what happened to the rudder wire."

The two made their way around to his side, Sam moaning continually about this and that. Then they lifted Andy until he could stand upon their shoulders and get a close view of the control wires.

"Here's the forward end of the rudder lead," they heard him murmur. He swung his flash light closer to the glistening hull. "I

knew it! It was filed, all but a few strands of the braid! The bird who did that knew that it would break after two or three hours of use. Boy, wouldn't I like to meet him, right here and now!"

"The only good thing about it," offered Sam, once again the quiet, efficient mechanic, "is that I can splice it in three shakes of a lamb's tail."

They lowered Andy to the ground.

"All right," he said, leading the way around the bow to the cabin door, "you can do that in the morning. Then we'll dope out a way to plug up that broken porthole so that it will stand a four-hundred-mile-an-hour wind. After we've done all that, we'll have the engineering job of turning this bus around and getting enough room to take off in. But I'm too tired to figure that out now. We'll all turn in, get a good night's sleep and get a bright and early start in the morning."

One after another, they mounted the swaying rope ladder. Andy was last up. He put Scotty under his arm and, thus handicapped, crawled up the jiggling rungs. Scotty was still out of humor, growling and whining under his

breath as though he had enjoyed his outing in the swampy jungle even less than Sam.

"We'll draw lots for the beds," announced Andy. "When this plane was designed, the fellow who planned the sleeping arrangements never figured upon its being used as a house boat."

"I'll pass around the slips of paper," offered Sonny. "The fellow who gets the shortest piece sleeps on the floor."

The others not protesting, the lad, with a slight smile on his face, turned his back, tore up some bits of paper, placed them in his pocket and then told each of the crew to reach into the pocket and remove a slip. This was done. Sonny then took the last slip, which he obtained only after considerable fumbling around.

When they compared the lengths of the torn slips, it was Sonny who held the shortest bit. In ten minutes, the three berths were occupied by Andy, Sam and Joe, who were all sound asleep. Sonny rose from a makeshift bed of blankets on the floor, pushed the slumbering Scotty away and folded up all the blankets

but one, which he left as a bed for the mascot.

If one had listened carefully, he might have heard the boy say under his breath:

"It was a shame to hide that short piece up my sleeve, but I have a night's work ahead of me and Andy would have made me go to bed."

For the greater part of the night, Sonny labored at his balky transmitter, resting now and then by slipping the phones over his ears and tuning the receiver. Signals were very weak, since he was forced to use the grounded hull of the plane itself for an aërial. But amid the crashing static, he caught bits of messages, enough to know that the search for the *Apex Rocket* was on in full force, although it was limited to the northerly stretches of the North Atlantic Ocean, thousands of miles away.

The boy's eyelids grew heavy, but he labored on, pausing now and then to switch the current into his transmitter and test for results. Time and time again he went through the motions of sending, then took up screw driver, electric iron and solder to repair some previously unnoticed break in the wires. But at last, shortly after four o'clock in the morning, his face broke

into a smile of happiness as he switched on the current. It was ready to send, at last.

Then, very quietly, he lifted a trapdoor in the floor of his cabin, descended into a locker which had been built between the rounded bottom and the floor, rummaged around among the stores and brought out an odd-looking package, long, slender, well wrapped in paper. As soon as he had closed the trapdoor again, he unrolled the package, in which were a number of sticks wrapped in fine linen. He placed them upon the floor and began to arrange them to his liking. Then, working very carefully lest he tear the cloth, he fitted the sticks together and, in another ten minutes, had completed the assembling of a very trim box kite which he stood on end in a corner of the room. From a cupboard he took a huge spool of very fine copper wire, the end of which he fastened to the box kite. Then, content with his night's work, he unfolded his blankets upon the floor which he had been using as a workshop, took off his coat and shoes and prepared to lie down beside Scotty.

But just as he was placing his pillow in the

proper position, the collie growled, scrambled to his feet and, trembling in every inch of his tense body, stared at the porthole just over the radio table. His growl changed into a snarl. He bared his teeth and crouched as though to spring.

Sonny glanced at the porthole and stood there, rivited to the spot. Framed in the steel rim of the bull's-eye was a black face, peering into the lighted interior of the ship with wide open eyes!

"Andy!" shouted Sonny, "Sam! Joe!"

But the others, already disturbed by Scotty's first growl, were already tumbling out of their berths.

"What is it, Sonny?" demanded Andy, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. But before the lad had time to answer, Andy had already seen the face at the porthole. He pointed to it. Sam and Joe saw it at the same instant. The face disappeared.

"Well, that's a sweet-looking sight for you!" exclaimed Sam. "Was that some nice, respectable member of a reception committee who wanted to present us with the keys to the

jungle and make us feel right at home, or was it a member of the kitchen police squad who is looking for some tender meat for the soup pot? I noticed that he licked his chops when he saw me!"

"I've read that there are both friendly and hostile natives in the jungles of South America," answered Andy seriously. "Some of the hostile ones have the pleasant little fad of collecting heads. We'd better wait until daylight before we do any scouting work outside the ship."

"In that case," suggested Sam, promptly, "we'll all feel better for some breakfast."

"Right!" agreed Joe. "Hello, what's that?"

They looked at him, to find him staring at Sonny's box kite. Noting the strand of copper wire, all understood its use at once.

"When did you make that, Sonny?" demanded Andy.

"During the night. The transmitter's fixed, also.

"Do you mean to tell us that you haven't had any sleep?"

Sonny flushed and looked away.

"Well, it had to be fixed right away, didn't it?" he countered.

Andy threw his arm around his little friend's slender shoulders.

"Next time I want you to sleep," he said softly, "I'll handcuff you to your bed!"

Despite the fact that serious danger might lurk outside the stout metal hull of the plane, breakfast was a cheerful affair. Adventurers of the type of these four could hardly be expected to worry overmuch about hazards which they were not yet certain existed. At any rate, after what they had gone through the day before, they were now in good spirits, making plans for the morning's work and laying out the routine for the day. Washing the dishes and setting things within the plane to rights, they busied themeselves until the sun rose with the same tropic haste in which it had set the evening before.

Then Andy went to a porthole, peering out to see if there were any natives within sight. He saw none. Very cautiously, he unbolted the

thick double frame and was relieved to feel a current of wind blowing in.

"Gee, that wind is hot!" he exclaimed. "But at least it is wind and we'll be able to get the kite up."

"Good," said Joe. "I'll tell the world that we'll want to get out of here as soon as we can. It's going to be a broiling hot day. When the sun begins to beat straight down on this old boat, we are going to think we are in an oven. Lucky we have that insulation between the double hulls, or we probably couldn't stand even one day of it."

"Shall I leave the porthole open?" asked Andy doubtfully.

"Sure," said Sam. "If the savages get too nosey, we'll close them again. In the meantime, let's have the air. It's hot in here already."

While Sonny gathered his kite and copper wire, the other three posted themselves at portholes and searched the dense underbrush thoroughly for signs of possible enemies. Seeing none, they made ready to open the door.

"I'll put up the kite," said Andy. "I'll take

Scotty and if there are any natives about, he'll warn me with his growling. While I'm doing that, Sam had better see what can be done about repairing the rudder wire. Be sure and fix whatever it was that made the rudder stick. Joe, you get out and study our position and see what are the best moves to be made to get the ship in position for a take-off. Sonny, you stand guard over us all. If you see anything suspicious, yell your head off!"

"Everything's fine," said Joe, "except the kite business. I'm the baby who is going to tote it out there in the clearing and put it up. I was the kite-flying champion of three counties when I was Sonny's age."

"Nothing doing," said Andy, taking the framework of sticks and linen away from Sonny. Before the others could stop him, he had called Scotty, dropped him gently to the ground and was climbing down the rope ladder.

"I certainly wish we had brought at least one gun along," muttered Joe, uneasily. "But who'd have thought when we are going to hop straight from New York to Paris that we'd have needed one?"

"After this," promised Sam, "I'll carry one just as regularly as I carry a flash light."

"That'll be all right," said Joe, descending the ladder, "if there *is* any 'after this'."

"Aren't you the cheerful little croaker!" retorted Sam, shivering, although the morning was hot. "If you don't stop spreading gloom, you'll spoil my day."

"Stop arguing," laughed Andy as he ducked under the stubby metal wing and headed for the clearing beyond the ship's tail. "We don't want to stay here forever, you know!"

CHAPTER XIII

POISONED DARTS

Crawling over great roots which wound across the ground like great snakes, ducking under the cross-laced creepers which seemed to reach out after him like living things, Andy reached the wide swath which the airplane had cut in the vegetation in its bullet-like swoop to earth. The knife-like leading edge of the short wing had sheared off branches, vines and even scrubby tree trunks without any apparent damage to itself. It was lucky, he told himself, that she had not been built of linen and wooden struts, with a propeller in front, like most planes. She would have crumpled her wings and splintered her propeller in her descent. As it was, she looked to be ready for flight if she could be turned about and headed in the right direction.

He emerged from the gloom of the jungle into the clearing they had spotted from the air

and into which they had steered in their descent. The jungle had been cleared away by hand, he noticed, and there had once been an effort to make a garden there. But it had evidently been abandoned for some time, since the lush growth of the jungle was already springing up underfoot and in a few months, the clearing would have been swallowed up by the fast-growing vegetation.

But the hand-cleared space made the boy walk more carefully as he carried the kite to the far end. Those who had used the place for a garden might not be far away. Scotty, keeping close to his master's ankles, sniffed the air this way and that, beginning again his low, uneasy growling and whimpering. Andy's eyes searched the edges of the jungle but he knew that if an enemy actually approached, Scotty would burst into a frenzy or barking. So he pushed ahead through the knee-deep scrub to the end of the clearing.

Once there, he took care that the copper wire, which was to be used as a kite string, should not tangle. Then, facing the wind which blew

from the direction of the plane, he waited for an unusually strong gust. He could see the stern of the great plane, half hidden in the shrubbery two hundred yards away. Sam, straddling the curved hull close to the rudder, was working busily upon his repairs. Joe could be seen, too, examining the position of the ship in the jungle, measuring distances to trees and to the edge of the clearing.

Suddenly, he saw the two men look toward the woods to the right of the ship as if listening. At the same moment, he heard Sonny's voice, high and shrill.

"Andy! Andy!"

Then Scotty's rumbling growl became a bark, a sharp, excited bark, a warning of danger close by. His nose was pointed toward the north side of the clearing as he crouched just between his master and the direction from which he thought danger might come.

Andy did not hesitate. With a strong upward swing, he tossed the box kite high into the air and began to run toward the ship, pulling upon the wire. He felt the spool tug at his

hands and knew the kite was still flying. Scotty ran ahead of him, filling the air with his challenge to the unseen enemy.

And then, from the north side of the clearing, he saw a dozen black men emerge from the woods on the run. They carried spears and shields and were nearly naked. As they ran they shouted and the sound of their voices nearly drove Scotty to a frenzy. Andy glanced backward at the kite. It was high above the trees now. He let out some more wire without breaking his stride.

Sam and Joe had picked up broken bits of trees to use as clubs and were running toward Andy at full speed. Seeing the savages, they veered off on an angle which would put them between Andy and the enemy. The pilot plunged on, his breath laboring in his lungs, conscious that the kite was now tugging hard at its wire and was slowing up his speed. But he must not let go! That aërial might save their lives and there was no knowing when there might come an opportunity to fly it again! If he should lose it, it might mean disaster for them all! So on he went, panting for

breath, his heart pounding violently as he strained every nerve and muscle to increase his speed.

The savages were closer. If Sam and Joe attempted to attack those spearmen, armed only with makeshift clubs, they were almost certain to be killed.

He had covered two-thirds of the distance when he heard Sam's cheery voice.

"Shift into high gear, old scout!"

For a moment he was tempted to release the kite and join the two who were about to give battle in his defense. They had not a chance in the world! Sonny, armed with a long monkey wrench, came bursting out of the foliage behind the plane, racing after Sam and Joe. Poor little Sonny! His strength would be that of a baby compared to the savages. In all his life, Andy's spirit had never been so bitter as now, yet he knew that he must not release that kite, which would be their only contact with the outer world!

Then, with a flash of tan and white fur, Scotty leaped away from Andy's side and raced toward the savages, who had now almost

reached Sam and Joe. His feet seemed hardly to touch the ground as he covered the distance in great bounds. He made not a sound now as he sped across the few remaining yards of green toward the spearmen.

So intent were the racing savages upon killing or capturing the white flyers that they did not see the dog until it was too late. In another ten steps the first of the natives would have closed with Sam, who, despite his bulk, had run ahead of Joe. The huge black man suddenly caught sight of the dog and whirled to raise his spear. But he was a split second too late. Still silent, Scotty seemed to leap into the air like a plane at the take-off. The spearman fell like a man who has been hit by a five-inch shell. There was a flurry of black skin and tan fur and Scotty leaped again at a group of the natives who were lunging at him with their spears. Then Sam and Joe closed in.

The kite, now high in the air, seemed to pull like a ten-ton tank, yet Andy drove himself on and on toward the plane. His throat was raw and dry and burned with every labored gasp for air. His legs ached and sent darting stabs

of pain into his body as he forced himself to keep up speed. He was close to the edge of the clearing, now, but those last few yards seemed to take years to cover.

Then he heard Sonny's yell.

"All right, fellows, come on! Here Scotty!"

In the next moment, Andy was twisting and turning beneath the tree branches, lest the aërial become fouled. A wide circle around the short wing—how long that took! He could no longer pull on the wire, so he unreeled it as he floundered through the bushes. Then, staggering with fatigue, he reached the bottom of the ladder and clambered up. Every step was a torture. But, somehow, he made it. Hardly knowing what he did, he wound the reel around something to hold it, then turned back toward the open door. He must go back and rescue Sonny, Sam, Joe and the faithful Scotty. But he had just begun to feel for the first rung when he heard a crashing in the underbrush.

"Get back there, Andy!" panted Sonny. "We're coming up!"

Hardly believing his ears, Andy scrambled back to the cabin floor and turned around.

There were the three men and the dog, racing through the foliage. Sonny was first to the bottom of the ladder. When he had climbed two steps, Andy reached over, grabbed him by the collar and swung him aboard like a sack of potatoes. Joe was next. Sam, in the shadow of the ship's side, turned, scooped up the panting Scotty and tossed him up toward the door. Andy caught two huge handfuls of fur and with a swift heave, brought the dog up to safety.

The natives were close, now. Andy could see their glistening black bodies through the underbrush. A spear crashed against the metal hull just over Andy's head, then fell to the ground. Sam, with an agility nothing less than marvelous for a man of his size, ducked under a spear that was lanced at him from the underbrush. Then he leaped for the ladder and climbed up it as fast as a monkey on a stick.

Andy pushed Joe back into the dim interior of the cabin, gave Sam a quick jerk that took him almost off his feet, then slammed the metal door, while Sonny raced through the ship, shutting and bolting portholes.

A shower of spears rattled against the side

of the ship. Through the broken porthole came the sound of yelling as the natives surrounded the strange air monster and pounded against its unyielding hull with their weapons.

Sam stalked through the ship, methodically switching off every electric light. Seeing Joe watching him, he explained.

"This little house party may last some time, boys and girls. Don't forget that our generator works only when we are in the air, so there is no way of replacing the juice we draw off. Sonny'll need quite a bit for his radio, so we mustn't waste any."

"If we should use it all up, Sam," asked Sonny, anxiously, "how will we start our rockets? They're worked by electricity, too, aren't they?"

"Yes. But I have a set of emergency dry batteries which will keep the rockets going until we recharge the main set in the air. But the thing I'm dreading is that we'll use up so much of our charge that we won't be able to use the stove and then, just imagine, we'll have to eat cold food!"

With that, all felt better. Sam was beefing

again, so things were not very bad, after all.

Sonny scampered to his radio set, hooked up the copper wire which led through the jamb of the closed door to the box kite far over the tree tops and tested his transmitter. Then he called to Andy.

"Ready to send now, Andy. What do you want, an SOS?"

Andy thought for a moment. No Apex ship under his command had ever sent out an SOS.

"No," he said at last. He wrote a few sentences on a slip of paper and read them to the others. " 'C.Q. To all ships and stations. Airplane *Apex Rocket* down uninjured in South American jungle approximately two hundred miles southwest Cape Cachipour. Change of course due to damaged rudder. Members of crew safe and well. At present besieged by natives. If we can drive them off, hope to be able turn plane about and continue flight to Paris. If help is sent suggest it be in flying boat or amphibian. Landing place too small for ordinary plane but river few miles distant.' How does that suit you, fellows? There's no use scaring them too much, but

they'll read between the lines that we need help pretty badly."

There was an instant's silence, during which they could hear the yelling of the savages outside and the rattling of missiles against the metal hull.

"O.K.," said Sam. "But I wish you'd tell them to bring along a couple of porterhouse steaks and some ice cream."

"Pipe down, Fatty," said Joe. "Send that message, Andy. It sounds just about right to me."

"Shoot it, Sonny," said Andy.

Sonny pressed his ear phones to his head and began to press the key. For three or four minutes the sound of the savages was all that broke the silence in the warm cabin.

"Whoops!" yelled Sonny excitedly. "A steamer has just answered my call!"

He turned a switch and his nimble fingers began to vibrate on the sending key. At the end of his message, he turned the switch again and listened. Then he turned to the others.

"Man, you should hear the excitement on the air! A dozen ships must have heard me. Then

a big shore station of the Tropical Radio cut in and stopped all their chattering. It is now relaying my message to Mineola. After a while I'll listen on the short wave lengths and see if I can't pick up the Apex factory direct."

"Well, papa must get busy," sighed Sam. "I've got to cover up that porthole so those babies outside can't toss in their toothpicks. And, since we may fly again some day, I'd better do a good job."

"We need some kind of ventilation," protested Andy. "We'll all roast to death if we're shut up tight in here."

"There's a ventilator in the ceiling," Sam reassured him. "I'll open that and then we'll be all right."

In a few moments he returned, holding a tiny sliver of wood in his fingers.

"Look at this queer thing," he announced. "There are a couple of dozen of them on the floor near the broken porthole. They look as though they had been shot into the opening, hit the bulkhead on the other side and then fallen to the floor."

Andy glanced idly at the little pointed object and then jumped as though he had been stung.

"Drop it, Sam!" he cried.

Sam, astonished, let the thing fall.

"What's eating you?" he demanded, looking from Andy to the sliver.

"Why, that is more deadly than a live rattler!" answered the pilot, turning it over very gingerly with the toe of his boot. "I've read about them lots of times. It is a poisoned dart, which those Indians shoot out of blowpipes. If you had as much pricked your finger with it, you'd be deader than a herring, right now!"

They bent down and examined the deadly little dart as it lay under a broad shaft of sunlight from a porthole.

"Look at that red, gummy stuff on the point!" Andy exclaimed. "That's the poison the savages use!"

Sam straightened up and looked carefully at his fingers.

"Let's go away from here," he said. "I don't like this place. What with snakes around, wild Indians yelling for a tender bit of

meat and those pointed, poisoned doohickeys flying about, I'm getting to positively dislike it here."

"All right," agreed Andy, "just get out, point the plane around in the right direction, fix the rudder and we'll go."

"I fixed the rudder," announced Sam. "The reason that it stuck so it twisted us off our course was very simple. The loose wire whipped back in the wind, wound itself all around the rudder hinge and jammed everything tight as a wedge. It took all my strength to pull the turns loose. But I did it and spliced the wire. Then you birds started to caterwauling when you saw the Indians and I fell, plop, right off the fuselage."

He went into the engine room, returned with a pair of pliers, with which he picked up the dart. Then, muttering to himself, he went back to his workroom, whence came the sound of hammering.

"I hope he doesn't get hit by one of those things while he's blocking up that window," murmured Andy. "If anything happened to Sam, we might as well open the outside door

wide and invite the Indians to come in here and carry home their dinners."

For the rest of the day, the four adventurers lounged in the cabin, listening to radio reports of rescue expeditions which were already setting out in their behalf. For the benefit of the others, Sonny had tuned in a Pittsburgh station which was broadcasting upon a short wave length and despite the distance and the fact that it was broad daylight, the reception was excellent.

The only discomfort suffered by the besieged flyers was the heat. In the direct rays of the tropic sun, the cabin became almost unbearable. A dozen times during the afternoon, terriffic showers swept down with the force of a waterfall. But even these did little to cool the interior of the plane.

Outside, the Indians had established a temporary camp. Whenever the boys looked out of the portholes they could see the natives sitting about, cooking meals and sleeping, arousing themselves at infrequent intervals to belabor the unfeeling sides of the air monster with clubs and spears. At first Andy had re-

mained alert and vigilant, ever watchful lest the savages find some way of entering the cabin. But they appeared to make no effort to climb aboard the metal fuselage, contenting themselves with rushing up to it, hitting it with their weapons and then dashing away to the safe distance of a dozen or more yards. So after an hour or two, Andy had relaxed in a folding chair, listening to the loud speaker with the others. Punctuated by intermittent crashes of static, the announcer's voice sounded through the cabin.

"—and the gallant young radio operator, David Collins, Jr., has just informed us by means of his short wave set that Andy Lane and his crew are at this very moment listening to the sound of my voice."

"Did you tell them to send the steak and ice cream, Sonny?" whispered Sam.

The announcer's voice droned on.

"We are glad to inform the crew of the rocket ship that several planes have started for the spot where they are down. First away was a fleet monoplane which left the Newark, N. J., airport the moment news was received

of the landing of Lane's ship. At present the name of the flyer of this rescue plane is in doubt as the flight was made with great secrecy. It is understood, however, that a very prominent aviator is at the controls——"

"Who do you suppose that can be?" demanded Joe, sitting up suddenly.

"It wouldn't be any of our gang," offered Sam, "because they——"

"Shhh!" interrupted Andy, "Listen!"

"—the famous trans-Atlantic amphibian *Apex Number Three* left Mineola within an hour of the time the message was relayed to the Apex factory. This remarkable ship is the amphibian in which Andy Lane and his crew rescued the dirigible *Britain.* She is manned by flyers and mechanics from the Apex factory, among whom are Dick Williams, who has flown with Andy Lane on many record-breaking trips as a mechanic, and Steve Lewis, who was an assistant pilot in the first crossing of the New York to Paris passenger-carrying flying boat. This mighty ship is shaped like a flying boat, but is equipped with wheels for making landings on the ground. She is carry-

ing supplies of every kind, including arms and ammunition for fighting off the Indians who have besieged Andy Lane and his crew.

"The world is watching the race between these two rescue ships with much interest. The speed of the first ship to leave is unknown, but experts who watched her take off estimated that she was somewhat faster than the Apex amphibian, which is known to have a cruising speed of about one hundred miles an hour. It is thought that the Apex plane, which will take the shortest compass course to Cape Cachipour, will arrive there sometime to-morrow afternoon. Since she is fully equipped with radio, she can then communicate with Andy Lane's crew, as well as with all ship and shore stations.

"We will give you additional bulletins as fast as they are received. For this purpose, ladies and gentlemen, we are putting on a special broadcasting program this evening which will continue all night."

As the voice went on to announce an hour of concert music, Andy signaled for Sonny to turn off the loud speaker.

"Listen, you fellows, I know what you are thinking and I am thinking the same thing. That first plane carries Brewster, or some of his men."

"Right," said Joe. Sam and Sonny both nodded in agreement.

"He's learned that we didn't crash into the water, so he's taking a chance on getting here first. In that case," continued Andy, "he'll probably try to get us to surrender so that he he can steal this plane. Failing that, he'll try to blow us up, or something, so that Mr. Avery will sell him the patents on the ship. Whatever he tries will be mighty unpleasant. We know that from our past experiences with him and his gang."

"All right," said Joe, dryly, "but here we are and what are we going to do about it?"

"We've got to find some way to get away before he arrives."

"Looks to me as though we had pretty much of a job on our own hands getting rid of those natives out there," protested Joe.

"Yes," Sam chimed in pessimistically.

"How are we going to do that without losing all the meat off our bones?"

"How many rockets have we, Sam?" demanded Andy suddenly.

"Enough to take us from here to Paris and halfway back," replied the mechanic after a moment's figuring with pencil and paper.

"All right then. Sonny, you take off your ear phones and listen."

They then went into a huddle which lasted an hour. At the end of which time, they all turned in and slept until late afternoon while the natives hammered unavailingly at the hull.

CHAPTER XIV

SURRENDER

As Andy had expected, the Indians made their most determined attack under cover of nightfall. But as he had not expected, their method of attack was startlingly efficient.

On the port side, the hammering on the hull became incessant. Even through the insulation the noise within the cabin was almost deafening. Standing in the blackness of the interior, the four flyers stood, tense and silent, attempting to gauge the progress of the attack in order that they might time their own effort to the exact moment when it would be most effective.

Suddenly they became aware of a flickering light within the cabin. Andy looked about in surprise. His eyes went to the portholes on the starboard side, then widened in amazement.

"Look, fellows!" he shouted. "They've started a fire outside. It's licking up against those portholes!"

For a moment, they remained stock-still, stunned by the realization that the savages had discovered the one thing most likely to wreck their chances.

"We've got to put a stop to that," said Andy quietly. "The heat of the blaze will warp the fuselage if it doesn't bake us first."

"All right, let's go," came Sam's voice, cool and confident. "Here are your flash lights."

Into the hand of each, he pressed the familiar round tube of a powerful electric flash. Scotty, who had been tied into a berth, whined and barked.

"Come on, Sonny," said Andy. "Let's see you show me the proper button."

Sonny and Andy disappeared within the control room while Sam and Joe, working at top speed, unscrewed the bolted door and made ready the rope ladder. In a moment Andy returned, alone. He stood beside the other two for an instant.

"We're taking a long chance on those bird's ignorance," he said, taking a long breath.

"Into the frying pan or the boiling soup pot," retorted Sam.

"Let's go, Sonny!" yelled Andy.

There was a loud hiss from the bow of the ship and in that moment Andy swung the door wide open and leaped to the ground. Sam and Joe followed. Instead of a pitch black forest, lighted only by the bonfire which the Indians had laid underneath the plane's hull, the entire jungle was deluged by a tremendous, gushing stream of crimson, yellow and blue flame, which spurted out of the forward rocket tube for a distance of a hundred feet into the undergrowth. Trees, vines and shrubs shriveled up and sank, flaming, into the path of the blaze. It seemed, in the contrasting darkness, a very Niagara of incandescent fire.

And as close to the edge of the flame as they dared venture, Sam and Joe, searchlights in hands, dashed about, yelling like madmen, making swoops toward the panic-stricken Indians who thought a volcano had opened up at their feet. The searchlights, when turned away from the rocket fire, probed long fingers of whiteness into the forest, picking out running Indians from the darkness and spurring them on to greater speed.

Andy, the instant his feet touched the ground, dashed for the bonfire which was endangering the ship. He kicked at it with shoes that smoked in the heat. One log after another he knocked out of the blaze as he worked in a frenzy of haste. He thought, for an instant, that the huge metal ship moved itself away from the flames. But no, that could not be. The heat was doing strange things to his eyes. Then, the pile of fagots strewn across the ground, there was nothing left but embers which could do no harm. He wheeled around to join the others.

Still dancing, running this way and that, whopping and yelling, Sam and Joe looked like black jumping jacks against the background of the rocket fire. Andy ran toward them, only to fall headlong over something that tripped him. He got up, hastily, turning his flash light upon what he took to be a fallen log. But it was a human figure, an Indian on hands and knees, who pressed his face hard against the ground when the white beam of the flash light fell full upon him.

Amazed and uncertain what to do next, Andy

suddenly became aware that other Indians were in a like position. Dozens of them, there were, all on hands and knees, faces close to the ground. At the same moment, Sam and Joe ceased their dancing and stared about as though they could not believe their eyes. Seeing Andy, they walked over to him, still looking at the prostrate Indians in the light of the gushing rocket.

"What'll we do with them?" demanded Sam, breathless from his exertions.

"Search me!" responded Andy, amazed at the success of his idea. The most he had hoped for was to drive the savages away. But here they were, swarms of them, with their faces to the ground like so many ostriches.

"Looks to me as though they were surrendering, or something," marveled Joe, leaning back against the hull of the plane. Then he jumped away from the ship, wheeling around and turning his flash light at her wheels.

"Andy," he yelled, "she's moving backward!"

The others, forgetting the Indians for the moment, peered at the wheels. Sure enough,

an inch at a time, the great ship was being pushed backward by the tremendous pressure of the rocket in her bow.

"I know!" shrieked Sam, jumping up and down in his excitement. "If these birds have surrendered, let's try to put 'em to work!"

For a moment the other two looked doubtful. Then Andy's face cleared. It was not, after all, any more impossible than what they had just accomplished.

"We'll try it," he said, and walked over to the nearest savage. He touched the trembling black side. The black man attempted to pull away. Then, at another prod, he looked up, his eyes darting from the three men who stood over him to the flaming rocket.

"Up," yelled Andy, making lifting motions with his arms while Joe and Sam turned their electric torches upon him. The Indian tried to dig into the ground like a mole. Andy reached down, and seized his muscular arm and hauled him to his feet. The ignorant face was a study in fright and despair. The three flyers pulled the native to a position beside the wing, pressed his two hands to the leading edge and them-

selves showed him that they wished him to push. Immediately the fellow pushed until they thought his back muscles would snap.

"Wait a minute, Bosco, you can't do it alone," laughed Sam, as he turned toward another Indian who, like the rest, was in the position of surrender. But the one who was at the wing was taking no chances. He pushed and pushed, while Joe stood guard over him with a flashlight. The second man offered no resistance when he caught sight of the other. It was clear that he feared the whites, but feared that he would be thrown into the flames if he refused. He soon lined up beside his comrade and began to push as heartily as the other.

One after another, Sam and Andy rounded up their prisoners. With each addition to the squad pushing upon the wings, the task of enlisting more became easier. Under the power of her roaring rocket, the ship had been inching her way backward toward the clearing. With the weight of nearly twenty blacks pushing the leading edge of the wing, she began to move back more rapidly.

Andy, turning over the guarding of the cap-

tives to the other two, ran around the wing, back the length of the hull and pulled and kicked sticks and deadwood from the path of the trailer wheel. He was thankful that the designer had mounted a wheel there instead of a skid, which would have dug itself deep into the soft earth and made their task doubly difficult.

Little by little they pushed her back into the clearing. Then, by dint of much shouting and waving of arms, the three flyers succeeded in getting the savages to push and pull in the proper places until she was turned around, headed across the narrow open space.

"Better signal to Sonny to turn off that rocket," advised Sam. "It's smoother here and he's likely to reverse her back into the scrub again."

Andy signaled to Sonny, who switched off the rocket. Instantly there was a wild stampede of the natives for safety. With the rocket off, they dared to make a break for cover. But Sonny, who had observed everything from his seat in the control room, immediately switched on both the rocket and the landing lights, thus making the area of light even broader and more

brilliant than before. With laughable promptness, the natives hurled themselves to the ground and several minutes were wasted in herding them back to their tasks.

"The next job before us," observed Andy, looking across the lighted clearing to the fringe of trees and shrubbery on the other side, "is to trim down the jungle over there so we'll have a fair chance of taking off."

"Yes," agreed Joe. "The nearest trees will have to be cut off close to their roots. With any luck we'll have left the ground when we get to them. Then we'll need the trees from there on trimmed off in a gradual slope, unless it would be easier to cut them down entirely. We won't have any too great a margin of safety in any case."

"Leave it to Sammy," announced the mechanic, cheerfully. He turned to the savage who had been first to surrender. "Come on, Bosco, shake your feet."

Although the Indian did not understand a single word, he had observed that if he followed these strange white birdmen, nothing very terrible would happen to him. So he obediently

left off pushing against the wing and began to follow Sam across the clearing. Sam looked over his shoulder. In the brilliant light, Joe and Andy could see a broad smile on his cheerful face.

"I'd like to keep Bosco," he called. "He's willing and would help a lot with the odd jobs. I guess it's no use, though. He's so big and healthy, he'd have an awful appetite."

He marched the black man across to the nearest trees and made cutting motions with his hands. But the Indian just watched him dumbly and did not understand. At last Sam took out his pocket knife and laboriously began to whittle the five-inch trunk away! Then the savage's face lighted up. He nodded and swung an imaginary ax against it.

"Attaboy, Bosco!" applauded Sam. "To the head of the class."

Bosco ran across the clearing, tapped one after another of his black companions on the shoulder and talked to them in guttural sentences. Several of them immediately disappeared into the woods. Joe was all for chasing

them with the flash light, but Sam would have none of it.

"They'll be back, old-timer," he declared positively.

In ten minutes they had returned, carrying a dozen long knives, almost as large as swords. Then, with all the good will in the world, they dashed across the clearing and began to attack the trees with great energy. Joe organized a gang to go over every inch of the runway, scraping off or patting down every uneven spot. The scene, strange as it was under the varicolored lights of the rocket and flares, was one of great activity and industry.

CHAPTER XV

THE STRANGE MONOPLANE

Andy glanced at his wrist watch. How time had sped by! It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. No wonder his limbs were weary.

"In another couple of hours," he said, "we'll be able to make an easy take-off, if Bosco and his pals don't strike for higher wages. Can you and Sam boss them while I go aboard and see that everything is ready to go?"

"Sure!" agreed Joe.

So Andy climbed the rope ladder and entered the darkened interior of the plane. Sonny had deserted his seat in the control room when he had seen that everything was going nicely and was now sitting at his radio set, listening to the voice from the loud speaker. Scotty was bouncing up and down in the berth to which he had been tied, whining and sneezing to draw his master's attention. Andy went over and patted him.

"Sorry we can't turn you loose yet, pup," he said. "You'd drive all our workmen away and then we'd be in a pretty pickle!"

"Listen to that loud speaker," called Sonny.

Andy turned away from the wriggling dog.

"—and at nine o'clock last evening, ladies and gentlemen," droned the announcer's voice, "residents of St. Pierre, Martinique, reported the sound of a very fast airplane passing overhead. It is thought that this must have been the mysterious rescue plane which left the Newark airport early yesterday morning. If so, it has been making remarkable time—more than one hundred and fifty miles an hour. We have a radio report from the Apex amphibian, which is making slightly over one hundred miles an hour. Steve Lewis, her pilot, estimates that he will arrive at his destination shortly after noon to-day. He has established radio contact with Sonny Collins, Andy's operator. Since the rescue plane is equipped with a direction-finding radio compass, the flyers expect no difficulty in finding the rocket plane. It looks——"

Andy did not hear the rest of the announcement. He was studying his charts.

"Sonny," he yelled excitedly. "If that first plane comes through at the same rate of speed it is making now, it ought to be getting here within an hour or two!"

"Yes," replied Sonny. "What's more, I've been in constant touch with Steve Lewis and Dick Williams. They aren't certain, of course, but they think that Brewster is in that monoplane. I've even had the Apex factory on the short wave. Dad and Mr. Avery are sitting by their receiver at the office right now. They are terribly worried, even now that they know the savages are no longer fighting us. Your father is on his way to the factory now so that he can listen to the reports."

"Do they think Brewster is coming down after us?" demanded the pilot.

"Yes, and they are nearly crazy. Mr. Avery says he had a telephone message from Brewster an hour after we took off. That crook laughed at him over the phone and told him that Andy Lane would never plan another flight. He is sure Brewster is coming down here to get us out of the way for good and that's why nobody knows who is flying the

monoplane. If Brewster can get rid of us, Mr. Avery thinks he'll do it and then fly away so fast nobody will ever be able to prove anything."

"Well, we'd better get busy," snapped Andy. "You'd better tell Steve and Dick that we're going to try to take off just as soon as we can. Tell them that we're going to make another shot for Paris if we succeed in getting into the air. It's under forty-five hundred miles and if the plane flies as well as it did coming down here, we'll be there by the middle of the afternoon."

He dashed into the pilot room and examined every control, every instrument, every fitting. Then he inspected every inch of the main cabin, stopping only at the engine room door. That was Sam's territory. Then he hastened down the rope ladder and ran across the clearing to the place where Sam was busily bossing the laborers.

"Get back to your engine room, Sam," he panted. "Get everything ready for an immediate take-off. Brewster—if the flyer in that strange plane *is* Brewster—is likely to get here

at any moment. We want to get away before he arrives. Our job is to fly to Paris."

"Attaboy," grinned Sam. "If any of those babies begins to slow up, just growl at Bosco and he'll get 'em busy again."

He ran across the clearing to the plane. Joe's gang had worked their way nearly to the point where the chopped-down trees made further smoothing of the runway useless.

"Never mind any more of that," called Andy, measuring the length of the smooth path with his eye. "If we aren't off by the time we get to where you are standing, we won't get off at all. Get your gang here to give my birds a lift at chopping down these two tall trees. They must be out of the way. When they are down, we'll have a fifty-fifty chance of getting away even without the greased launching tracks."

"Yes," nodded Joe. "They're too close for us to zoom over, even with the best of luck."

By dint of much waving of arms, he got his gang to work with the others. But the trees were thick and only two men could chop at a trunk without getting in each other's way. So

the work went on, while Andy and Joe stood by to keep the Indians busy.

"Listen!" said Andy, suddenly.

Joe cocked his head on one side and stood motionless. To his trained ears came a faint buzz, high in the northeastern sky.

"Well, that's that!" he said. "It's the stranger. And we aren't off yet!"

"You beat it back into the plane," directed Andy, briefly. "See that everyone is strapped in, ready to go. I'll be back in a jiffy and we'll shove off."

Joe hesitated. He knew Andy so well that he hated to leave him where he might subject himself to any risk in order that the plane and its crew might be safe.

"Beat it!" snapped the boy, seeing the other standing there.

Knowing that any protest would be useless, Joe raced across the ground to the ship, while Andy watched the black men chopping at the trunks of the two trees with their long, glistening knives.

Straight as a bullet the buzzing airplane headed for the lighted clearing in the dead

black jungle. Andy knew that the blaze of the rocket and the white beam from the landing lights must make the spot stand out in the vast, empty blackness of the country like a beacon in the night. But he dared not turn off the lights lest the savages regain their courage and make a successful bolt for freedom.

Andy, blinded by the intense glare from the rocket plane, could not see into the darkness overhead, but he knew that the strange ship was now almost directly over the clearing. The savages were still hard at work. If they heard the drone of the motor, they simply accepted it as another of the strange events of the past day and night. One of the trees would be felled in a few minutes. Its trunk was more than half severed.

The noise of the throbbing engine suddenly ceased and was replaced by the shrill whine of wind through wires and struts. The pilot up there in the inky sky was gliding. The thought flashed through Andy's mind that perhaps it was a friend, after all. Then there came a peculiar noise, a shrill whistle, the like of which Andy had never heard before. In the next in-

stant he was almost thrown from his feet by a tremendous explosion. From the north end of the clearing a huge fountain of blue, yellow and crimson flame leaped high into the sky, carrying with it branches, bits of deadwood and odds and ends of débris. From close at hand there was another crash and out of the corner of his eye, Andy saw the tree what had almost been cut through topple to the ground.

A bomb! So it *was* Brewster, who was taking this method of ridding the world of his enemies! Wheeeeeee! Another bomb shrilled its way to the ground and the earth rocked again. The aim was a little better, this time. The explosion was closer to the glittering hull of the all-metal rocket ship.

The savages, their fear of the rockets being forgotten in their terror of the detonating explosions, stampeded for the depths of the underbrush. Andy knew that all control over them was lost. But what difference did it make? There was no time for more tree cutting, anyway. He stood where he was for another long moment, his eyes studying the swath of fallen trees which the Indians had cut. One

of the two which they had just been working upon still stood. The other had crashed to the ground at the first explosion. Was there room to edge by that which remained? It would be a a tight squeeze, but a headlong crash into the jungle would be better than being the target for the bomb which sooner or later would find its mark.

Then he turned and raced across the path of light toward the rocket ship. The enemy airplane above was still gliding. He could trace its direction by the sound of the wind and by the fluttering of its idling propeller. Brewster had evidently overshot the clearing and was turning to glide straight across it once more. How could he miss such a plain target? From the sound, he was half a mile beyond the clearing on the other side of the rocket plane and was now approaching its target in a slow glide. Andy redoubled his speed. The door to the cabin was open. Sam stood at the entrance, leaning out and beckoning wildly to the boy. The enemy was almost directly over them now. As Andy covered the last few steps to the shadow of the ship's side, he heard the now-

familiar sound of another falling bomb. He leaped for the ladder and scrambled halfway up before he was almost crushed by a mighty billow of heat which crashed him against the metal side of the fuselage. The air seemed filled with scarlet flame. He felt his fingers slipping from the rungs. A strong hand closed about his wrist. The noise of the explosion deafened him. There seemed to be nothing but noise in the whole world. Then, suddenly, he was lifted into the air. He felt a solid floor under his feet. He was in the cabin of his ship! The door clanged shut but he did not hear it. He was still deaf from the close-by explosion of the bomb.

Joe snapped on all six rockets as soon as he heard Sam close the metal door. The plane was just leaping ahead as Andy reached his seat in the control room. Then the boy's head seemed to snap back against the upholstery as the tremendous energy of the six great rockets got in its work.

Just ahead of them another geyser of flame leaped for the sky. But even as its glare illuminated the cabin, the speeding ship had

passed it. Only the electric searchlights pointed the way across the clearing, for Joe had cut off the bow rocket just as Andy had reached for the ladder. But in this white beam, the edge of the clearing approached so fast that Andy's heart sank. Surely, they could never pull her off in time to clear that tall tree which remained standing!

Although his straining eyes were fixed upon the tiny gap in the jungle through which they would have to zoom the rocket ship, he saw a sudden flash of light in the sky just ahead of them. It was the enemy monoplane at the end of her unsuccessful glide, swinging around as though to turn back toward the fast-taxiing ship below.

It was directly before them, at about three hundred feet altitude. Suddenly Andy knew that another danger confronted him and his crew. That plane up there would be, in a moment, exactly in the course they would have to take to clear the trees. But there was no time to change their plans. The ground speed of the rocket ship was terrific.

Now—it was zoom her off or crash headlong into the trees. With his heart in his throat, he pulled hard back on the wheel. Would she make it? Her bow rose like a flash of light. There came the sound of crashing branches. The heavy plane lurched slightly, and was free! But straight before them was Brewster's plane, a stream of dotted flashes issuing from her bow. Machine gun fire! Hard over, or crash!

With all his strength Andy kicked the rudder and leaned hard on the wheel. The rocket plane banked over and veered from her course. But it was almost too late. Brewster's plane seemed to close in upon them as if by lightning. Andy held his breath, awaiting the crash which would finish everything.

Ah, they were by! He was sure that his wheels had grazed the monoplane's wing tip! Ahead of them was nothing but clack sky, sky where nothing that flew could catch them until accident or intention brought them again to ground. Let Brewster and his gang of murderers follow him if they chose. He was making three miles to their one!

"Look!" screamed Joe, pointing toward the rear-view mirror.

Behind the hurtling rocket ship roared the fiery tail from her six tubes. And diving down out of that mass of white-hot gas was the enemy monoplane, blazing from stem to stern. In his anxiety to shoot Andy out of the air, her pilot had accidently dived straight through the rocket flame. Done for! Before Andy turned his eyes away in horror, he saw the burning ship crash in the depths of the jungle amid a pool of blazing gasoline which leaped redly into the night sky.

CHAPTER XVI

A MESSAGE FROM PARIS

HURTLING across blue tropic seas at four hundred miles an hour seemed almost too peaceful after the horrible events of the hours before dawn. An altitude of fifty thousand feet seemed nothing unusual after the flight from New York to South America.

Sam was serving lunch—a lunch that would have done credit to any chef in the world. Chicken, crisply broiled on the electric grill, light, fluffy biscuits of which he was shamefully proud, baked potatoes and apple pie—what a lunch!

"When we land in Paris this afternoon," announced Sam, "I'm going to take the chef of the Ritz aside and tell him what he should know about real cooking."

"Aren't you the shrinking violet?" mocked Andy, who was eating while Joe flew the plane.

"Well, I have to boast to cover up my broken

heart," replied Sam, his round face setting itself into mournful lines.

"What's the matter with your heart?" demanded Sonny. "Did you strain it last night doing some real work for a change?"

"No. I am grieving over Bosco. Just think of a boy like that around the plane here, shining the brass, washing up the dishes and doing all my little odd jobs! What a shame to lose an assistant like that!"

"Well, you'd have to pull all his teeth," laughed Andy, "and buy him a false set made of rubber."

"Why rubber?" demanded the mechanic, innocently.

"Because some day you wouldn't suit your Bosco with your tough chicken and heavy biscuits and he'd start to make a meal out of you."

"I forgot to ask him whether he was a cannibal or not," acknowledged Sam. "At any rate, I shall miss him. Maybe I'll put a help wanted ad in the papers, hoping that he'll see it."

"Yes, put it in the 'Cannibal Daily News' and mail a copy to him addressed, 'Bosco H.

Whoosis, Jungle. Brazil, South America,' " suggested Andy helpfully.

Sonny, who had finished his dinner, reached over and quickly speared the remains of Sam's chicken from his plate. With a clever twist of his fork, he hurled it over toward Andy's berth where Scotty, who had been watching the table hopefully, pricked up his ears and caught it on the fly. Before the astonished Sam could open his mouth, the chicken was gone and the pup was delicately licking the bones.

"That pays you for the meat you stole off my plate the day before yesterday," remarked Sonny triumphantly. Whereupon he hastily retreated to his radio set. The laugh was upon Sam and he laughed too, but nearly wept over the loss of his delicious tidbit.

Just as Andy was making his way toward the control room, Sonny called him.

"Listen, Andy, here's news! Steve and Dick have just landed the amphibian in the clearing we used for a take-off. They report that they were greeted by some natives who told them by sign language that there were

two men in Brewster's plane and that they both escaped from the fire."

"That's better luck than they deserved," remarked Andy. "But I'm glad, just the same. I'd hate to think of anyone being burned in a crash, even Brewster. Do they say where the two crooks are now?"

Sonny tapped the key for several seconds and then listened.

"The savages say they are in the jungle somewhere. Steve says there's a town forty or fifty miles south of there and that he thinks Brewster will make for there."

"I don't care when, if ever, they reach it!" declared Sam positively.

"Steve says they are taking off in a little while for Georgetown, in British Guiana. They'll stay there a day or two and then go home by easy stages. And listen, Andy, here on the low wave, the factory is talking to us. Dad says that nothing we've ever done has created so much excitement as this rocket plane trip. Millions of people stayed up all night listening to the radio and when we finally reported that we had taken off again, thousands of people

telegraphed their congratulations to us in care of the Apex factory."

"I've got to go now and relieve Joe," Andy said, turning toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" urged Sonny. "Here's something more. Mr. Avery sends word that if the rocket plane can take off from a little place like that, he's all for it. He has had three telephone messages from Washington already, starting negotiations for the purchase of some small rocket ships by the army and the navy."

"That's wonderful!" beamed the pilot. "Then our flight has been more than an adventure. It's bringing more business to the factory. We won't know what to do with all our money if this keeps up."

He entered the control room and took his seat beside Joe.

"Better go in and have your lunch," he suggested as he took the controls.

"Nothing doing," said Joe firmly. "I went to Paris a few times while I was flying in France during the war and I know how they cook there. I'm saving up my appetite to eat them out of house and home! We'll sight the

southern coast of Spain in less than an hour and then it won't be long to Paris."

Sam's eager voice came from the door behind the pilots.

"Did you say you knew a good place to eat in Paris?" he demanded, as hungrily as though he had not eaten for a week.

"Yes. There's one place where they make a specialty of roast duck," replied Joe. "It comes on the table all brown, and the owner of the restaurant carves it himself and——"

"Oh, boy!" beamed Sam, rolling his eyes and patting his bulging stomach.

Sonny came dashing in with a slip of paper.

"Listen, fellows," he said excitedly, "I have a message here from the Eiffel Tower. Le Bourget Field is ready for us. There are thousands and thousands of people there to watch us land. The roads from Paris are so jammed that cars can hardly move. But listen—the American Ambassador has invited us to a banquet! The President will be there and the Premier and all the big officials!"

"Good night!" moaned Sam. "We'll listen to hours and hours of speeches. At nine or ten

o'clock we'll get a dried-up leg of chicken to nibble and we'll nearly starve to death. I'm going to cook me up a couple of fried egg sandwiches right now so I won't be too hungry at dinner time!"

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